



## **Cage Door Wide Open** by **pineapplefan**

**Category:** Stranger Things, 2016

**Genre:** Angst, Hurt-Comfort

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin H., J. Hopper, Jonathan B., Steve H.

**Status:** In-Progress

**Published:** 2017-12-11 20:12:03

**Updated:** 2019-11-28 10:39:50

**Packaged:** 2019-12-12 15:05:02

**Rating:** T

**Chapters:** 27

**Words:** 40,102

**Publisher:** [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

**Summary:** Turns out his father's ire is exactly what he should be worried about right now.

# 1. Chapter 1

Steve flicks bottle cap number three onto the tarp covering the pool in his backyard.

He's sitting on the end of his diving board, letting his legs dangle beneath him. The cool November air stinging his cheeks goes unnoticed as he's already three beers deep before 11:00 am on a Sunday.

He's thinking about Barb.

He can't believe that over a year has gone by, and yet Nancy's friend with the big glasses and dumpy skirt is constantly on his mind.

He'd seen her that night.

The night of the party.

Through his window.

He'd seen her sitting right where he's sitting now.

Her posture had been haggard, head was drooping, legs were swaying slightly beneath her.

He could've spoken up. *I thought your friend went home*, he could've said to Nancy. *She's sitting out there on the diving board.*

He could've said that.

But then Nancy would have gone to her. And Steve wanted Nancy all to himself.

So he stayed quiet and Nancy was his and Barb was taken by the Demogorgon and killed and now Steve thinks about her every damn day.

More accurately, he thinks about her parents.

Nancy had dragged him to meet them.

That was depressing.

But Barb – she's just the tip of the iceberg.

Steve starts thinking about her and then he's thinking about *all* of it.

He doesn't really know where to go from here.

xxx

Steve's been sleeping a lot the past week.

He's not quite fully recovered from the concussion he suffered from his scuffle with Billy and a lot of days he doesn't even feel like getting out of bed.

He does though. He goes to school.

He keeps to himself mostly, but eats lunch with Nancy and Jonathan. They all try their best to ignore the tension there.

He avoids Billy Hargrove like the plague, but always seems to feel his eyes on him.

He bailed on his college applications. They're sitting, unfinished, on his kitchen table.

He doesn't even want to think about what his parents will say when they return, in one week, from his father's business trip to Paris.

So he doesn't think.

He sleeps.

xxx

He's buried under a pile of blankets when he wakes to someone calling his name.

The voice is faint, disjointed.

*"Do –ou co-py? Steve? Do you copy?"*

It's dark out and it takes Steve a moment to realize that the voice belongs to Dustin. And that it's coming from the Realistic® walkie-talkie the kid brought him a few days ago.

Steve groans because the walkie-talkie is sitting on his desk and his head always feels like it's going to explode when he goes from supine to sitting.

With great effort, Steve hoists himself up and sits on the edge of the bed. He pinches the bridge of his nose until some of the pressure subsides.

*"Steve? Come in, Steve. Are you there?"*

To avoid standing up, Steve reaches across the space separating himself from his desk and almost tips off the bed in the process.

"What, Henderson?" he says with a huff, once he has a handle on the device.

*"Geez, hello to you to,"* Dustin returns. *"Lemme guess. You were sleeping?"*

"Nothing better to do," Steve says.

*"There is now,"* Dustin says. *"Mike, Lucas, Will, and I are setting up to play Dungeons and Dragons. You should come. We're at the Byers' place."*

Steve smiles a little fondly. Dustin hasn't left him alone since the night of Apocalypse Part II. None of the ankle biters have. There's always someone to come by and make sure he's still alive and kicking.

Because, you know, concussion.

"Look, I don't even know how to play," Steve tells Dustin. "I'd just slow you guys down." Besides, he's not itching to go back to the Byers' place anytime soon. Every time he goes there he seems to wind up fighting monsters, human or otherworldly.

*"You should just come and watch, then. Learn for next time,"* Dustin suggests. *"Come on, man. You know you want to."*

Steve runs a hand through his greasy hair, takes a glance outside his window. It's raining, and picking up pace. "Is that so?"

"Yup," Dustin says proudly. "*You just don't know it yet.*"

If Steve's being honest with himself, it does sound kind of appealing. As much as he would deny it if he was asked, he really enjoys spending time with those kids. There's a kind of innocence and purity about them, something you don't ever see once you reach high school.

The problem is, his head is pounding. He's exhausted and has a deep ache in his bones. He regrets the fact that the only thing he's put in his body this date is cheap beer.

If he going to commit to this, he's going to have to eat something. Of substance.

And probably take a shower.

"I'll see if I can make it over," he tells Dustin.

"Yes!" Dustin exclaims and Steve hears some whoops from Mike, too. "*Over and out.*"

xxx

Steve decides that food is priority numero uno, so he goes downstairs to scrounge through the fridge. It's mostly empty, but Steve is able to conjure up some bread and some old slices of cheddar to make a grilled cheese sandwich.

He sits on the stool at the island counter, looking at the mess of empty beer bottles, soda cans, and pizza boxes he's neglected over the past couple of weeks. Gosh, he has a lot of cleaning up to do before his parents get home. Normally the place looks and feels like a museum.

The rain continues to pound against the sliding glass doors as Steve chews his sandwich. He hopes that the rain will have lightened up by the time he's finished with his shower and ready to head out.

As Steve chokes down his last bite of grilled cheese, he hears a car pull into the driveway. He slides off his stool to go take a look through the sidelight window by the front door.

His heart jumps into his throat at what he sees. He sees a cab, and Henry, his *father* – who isn't supposed to be due home for another week– is coming up the drive with his luggage in tow.

"Oh, shit. Shit, shit, shit," Steve mutters, backing away from the door, anticipating the lecture that is sure to befall. But then he realizes something about his dad.

Steve's mother isn't with him.

Puzzled, Steve swings open the front door and meets his dad halfway up the drive as the cab backs away slowly. A dumb move on Steve's part because he's barefoot and only wearing a T-shirt and sweatpants in November.

"Dad!" Steve yells a greeting, squinting through the rain. It's cold, and raining hard. Steve thinks he would rather have snow. He reaches to take one of his dad's bags. "You're back early. Where's Mom?"

Henry doesn't answer, just grunts and pushes past Steve to inside.

Steve follows.

"What's with all the newspapers in the driveway, Son?"

Steve swallows hard. If *that* was the first sentence out of his dad's mouth then he was really in for a treat.

Steve cards a nervous hand through his hair; he never reads the newspaper and he hadn't left the house much the past few days. Bringing the newspapers in hadn't even crossed his mind. "Sorry, Dad, I guess I just didn't get to—"

"Jesus, look at this place, Steven!" Henry interrupts angrily as he drops his bags by the stairs in the foyer. "Are you kidding me with this shit?"

"I know. I know it's bad," Steve placates, wishing he could say *I've*

*been a little busy fighting monsters.* But his father's ire isn't what he's worried about right now. So he asks again, "Where's Mom?"

Henry whips around to face him and Steve catches a strong whiff of alcohol on his breath. "She wouldn't get on the fucking plane," he spits. "Not another word about her, you hear?"

"What? You mean she's still back in Paris?"

"What did I just say?" Henry yells. "Not another word about that whore!" He grabs Steve's T-shirt by the collar and slams him against the island counter.

Turns out his father's ire is exactly what he should be worried about right now.

Steve feels his lower back connect with the marble and the pain radiates all the way down his to his feet. "Holy shit," he whispers, breath caught in his chest from the blow. And the shock – his dad's a real asshole, but he's never laid a hand on him before. "Dad, I think you're really drunk. Just calm down, alright?"

"Calm down?" Henry lets go of Steve's shirt, pushes him roughly away. "Calm down?"

There's a wild look in his eye that Steve's never seen before. He needs to get out of here... He needs to...

A beer bottle comes hurtling at his head and Steve ducks just in time for it to miss and shatter against the wall behind him. The surprise knocks him off his feet and he winds up flat on his ass, covering his head with his arms.

"Ungrateful, irresponsible..." Henry is spewing insults as four more bottles shatter over him.

Then it all stops. Steve can feel himself shaking. Wonders how hurt he is. Wonders if he's bleeding. Wonders if his dad is going to kill him.

"Get the hell out of my sight!" his father roars.



Steve doesn't need to be told twice. He scrambles to his feet and races to the front door.

He doesn't stop running.

He doesn't look back.

## 2. Chapter 2

Jonathan is sprawled out on the couch reading *Slapstick* for probably the fourth time. He really needs to add more Vonnegut to his collection. He's been meaning to check *Dead-Eye Dick* out from the library for over a year now.

"You can come play with us if you want," Will had offered before his friends arrived.

Jonathan had appreciated that, but he was pretty sure Dungeons and Dragons wasn't his gig. "Nah, you guys can just do your thing."

"You're gonna read Vonnegut, aren't you?"

To which Jonathan had shoved Will playfully. "You sound like Nancy."

xxx

It's nearing 7:00 when Jonathan hears a hesitant knock on the front door. It takes him by surprise as a slow spot in the book, the pounding rain, and the general merriment of Will and his friends had started to lull him to sleep.

Jonathan sits up and tosses his book aside. "I'll get it," he announces, hoisting himself off the couch. The kids are so into their game that they barely acknowledge him. They probably hadn't even heard the knock.

Jonathan crosses the room to swing the door open and his heart skips a beat.

Steve Harrington is standing on the porch in front of him, soaked from head to toe. He's barefoot, clad only in sweatpants and a thin, white T-shirt. He's leaning heavily against the doorjamb, head hanging low, like it's taking a great deal of effort for him to keep upright. His breaths are short and thin; he must've run like hell to get here.

"Steve?"

"Hey, B-Byers," he says shakily and lifts his head. His eyes are glazed and his lower lip is trembling slightly. It's like he's doing everything in his power to not fall apart right there on the porch. In the dim light, Jonathan can see that Steve is sporting some deep cuts all up and down his arms.

What in the world...?

"What happened to you?" he blurts. "Are you okay? Jesus, do you... do you need a hospital?"

"No," Steve breathes. "I'm okay. I'll be fine. This is nothing. It's nothing." His voice is cracking all over the place. "C-Can I come inside?"

Jonathan snaps out of it then. Steve must be positively *glacial* and here he is, gaping at him while he continues to freeze his ass off on the porch. "Yeah, sorry, man. Of course." He puts a gentle hand against Steve's back and ushers him across the threshold and inside.

Nothing puts a stop to a riveting game of D&D quite like a sopping wet entrance from Steve Harrington.

Will and his friends go silent. Henderson's face drops instantly. "Steve?"

"Hi, guys," Steve manages to greet the kids over a shuddering, heaving chest. Then he looks to Jonathan as if to say, *please don't let them see me like this*.

"What's going on?" Will asks softly, eyes wide. "Steve, are you okay?"

Steve opens his mouth to answer, but Jonathan's getting sick of him claiming he's okay when he so clearly is not. He grabs the knitted afghan off the couch and drapes it over Steve's shoulders.

"I'll be the judge of that," Jonathan says. "Will, call Hopper and get him here, okay? And try to get ahold of Mom, too."

Will nods obediently and bounds off into the kitchen.

"Steve?" Dustin says again. He's close to tears.

Steve looks at Jonathan to answer.

Jonathan swallows hard. "He'll be okay," he assures the remaining three as calmly as he can manage.

Steve nods, as if to echo Jonathan's words. He's biting down hard on his left cheek.

"I'm gonna get Steve some dry clothes and we're gonna talk for a bit," Jonathan continues. "You lot just wait for Hopper to get here. Got it?"

Lucas and Mike say, "Got it," but Dustin protests, inches closer. "No. Steve...?"

Steve closes his eyes at Dustin's imploration. "Henderson," he croaks. "Don't."

*Not now.*

It's dead silent as Dustin retreats back a few steps, looking mildly offended but not any less concerned.

"Okay," Jonathan says, nudging Steve slightly in the direction of his bedroom. "Let's go."

xxx

"Thanks, Byers," Steve says, once they're behind closed doors. He's shivering harshly now, as if the cold has finally caught up to him. "Y-Your mom's not h-home, huh?"

Jonathan understands that Steve appeared on the doorstep looking for an adult. For whatever reason, Harrington is awfully beat up and scared, and Jonathan feels an incredible weight on his shoulders because he's the one who has to take care of the situation until a properly equipped adult can get here. Which is why he had Will call Hopper.

"She's working late," Jonathan answers as he ushers Steve over to his bed to have a seat. "But Hopper will be here soon, okay? You sure you don't need a hospital?" When Steve nods, Jonathan hurries over to his dresser to pull out some old gray sweats. "Okay. Here," he says,

offering them to his guest. "Put these on. They're old, so don't worry about..."

*...getting your blood on them.*

Steve obeys and starts peeling off his T-shirt. Jonathan gives him some privacy by turning to face the window, where the rain is still coming down hard. Jonathan bites down on his index finger – something he always does when he's nervous.

"Steve?" he says around his knuckle, when he hears Steve's wet T-shirt flop to the floor.

"Y-Yeah?"

Jonathan clears his throat, braces himself for the answer to the question he's about to ask. "Can you tell me who?"

It's quiet for a few beats, and then...

Steve speaks two words. Two little words that make Jonathan's blood boil and his hair stand up on end:

"My dad."

### 3. Chapter 3

Jonathan is sitting on the floor using Joyce's tweezers to pull glass out of Steve's left foot. Steve must've stepped on one of the shards that scattered the room as he scrambled to his feet to get away.

Jonathan was the one who had noticed it was bleeding.

Steve hadn't even felt it. Still doesn't.

He's too numb. (And not just from the cold.)

"You doin' okay?" Jonathan asks, looking up to meet Steve's eyes.

"Yeah," Steve answers automatically.

Jonathan's gaze lingers on him a little longer, unbelieving. But Steve is being halfway honest.

At least here he feels *safe*.

Dare he even say *loved*?

xxx

Jonathan works diligently and intently as he patches Steve up.

Steve barely knows Byers, but he knows enough to know that the guy isn't much of a talker and at the moment, he's not pressing for answers.

Steve is grateful. He doesn't think he can speak over the lump in his throat.

Jonathan is overly delicate as he cleans the cuts on Steve's arms with antiseptics that he seemed to produce from nowhere. Steve lets him.

He's so tired.

xxx

"Where's your mom?" Jonathan asks quietly, once he's stopped his

ministrations and has joined Steve on the bed. He sits close, thighs lightly touching.

Steve swallows hard, feels emotion rise back up in his chest. "Don't know."

"What do you mean?"

Steve runs his hands through his damp hair then lets them fall against his sides. "They were in Paris."

"Your mom and dad?" Jonathan clarifies.

Steve nods. "My dad had a business trip. They weren't due back for another week." He clears his throat gruffly, tries to get a grip. It's all starting to hit him now.

"They came back early?"

"He did. She wasn't with him." Steve bites down on his lip. "He said she wouldn't get on the plane."

"So they fought." It's not really a question.

"I-I don't know. I c-couldn't... I had to get out." His hands feel numb. This is too much to deal with. He's going to fucking lose it.

"Okay," Jonathan says quietly, putting his hand on Steve's knee and squeezing gently. He can sense that Steve is on the brink. "We'll figure this out. You're safe now."

*You're safe now.*

xxx

Some amount of time later – Steve has lost all track of time – Jonathan asks if he wants to lie down.

Steve does. His lower back is aching something awful. He winces as he remembers his dad shoving him into the island counter. No fucking wonder his back hurts.

Jonathan helps bring his legs onto the bed while Steve relaxes into his pillows.

"Close your eyes if you want to, man. I'll wake you up when Hopper gets here."

Steve lets his heavy lids close and listens to Jonathan putter around his room.

He's out within minutes.

Xxx

Steve rouses slightly to hushed voices.

"He thinks his mom's still in Paris." That's Jonathan.

"Did he hit his head?" That's Joyce. "Because he's still recovering from that concussion, and if he hit his head..."

"I don't think he did, Mom. He got out of there fast."

"Is his dad still at the house?" That's Chief Hopper.

"As far as I know, yeah."

Steve opens his eyes then, sees Jim, Joyce, and Jonathan hovering by the bedroom door. He pushes himself up into a seated position, head feeling like a thousand tons. "Hey," he croaks.

"Oh, Steve, you're awake," Joyce says, crossing the room to sit next to Steve on the bed. "How are you feeling, hon?" She gives Steve a warm side-hug and then pulls away to run a hand through his mop of hair.

"I'm okay," Steve says earnestly, because he *should* be okay. This is nothing compared to fighting Demodogs, right?

*Right?*

"Let me take a look at him," Hopper says. "You two mind giving us a moment?"

"Sure," Jonathan says. "Mom?"



Joyce sighs, not fond of being dismissed in her own home. "Fine," she says. She squeezes Steve's knee and stands up.

"We'll just be a second," Jim assures her, walking her to the door. He closes it behind them and then turns to face Steve.

He's in his officer get-up minus the boots. He must've kicked them off at the front door. "Hey, kid," he greets gruffly as he removes his hat and sets it down on Jonathan's dresser.

"Hey, Chief," Steve returns awkwardly. He's finding it hard to meet Jim's eyes; he's always been a little intimidated by the man.

"Those kids out there are pretty freaked out on your behalf, Harrington," Jim says, thumbing over his shoulder.

Steve tries to find his voice. "Yeah. I s-showed up l-looking pretty rough, I guess. I'm okay now – you really didn't have to—"

"Nonsense," Jim states bluntly, and holds a stare until Steve meets his eyes. "If any of you kids are ever in trouble, of *any* kind, I am only one call away and I will be here. You understand me?"

Steve looks down abashedly, can feel the honesty in Jim's proclamation. "Yes, sir," he says quietly, and reaches up to rub the back of his head. "So, uh, did Byers fill you in?"

"He did."

Steve bites down on his lip. "O-Okay. Okay, good."

Hopper clears his throat. "And I'm sure Jonathan did a good job patching you up, but I still want to take a look. If that's okay."

Steve nods. He sits still while Jim kneels down in front of him to peel off his sock and take a look at his injured foot. He only shudders a little as Hopper removes his sweatshirt to look at the cuts on his arms.

But he flinches when Jim puts a delicate hand on his lower back because it *hurts*. "Son of a bitch..." Jim growls. "Jesus, kid..."

Steve sucks in some shuddering breaths as Jim continues to lightly press the bruises on his back.

"That's it," Jim says firmly, resolutely.

"What?" Steve breathes.

"Here, kid, get this back on," Hopper says as he helps guide Steve's arms through the sweatshirt so he can pull it back over his head. "I'm going to go pay your dad a visit."

Steve's heart stutters and a wave of nausea washes over him. But he feels himself whispering, "Okay," because that's what his father deserves.

Hopper crosses the room to open the door, to which Jonathan and Joyce are still standing right outside. "I'm going to the house," Jim tells them as he puts his hat back on.

"But Hop, there's a flashflood warning for the county," Joyce protests. "I just saw it on the news... It's not safe."

"I will be fine," Jim says. "It's not that far."

Joyce brings her hands to her head. "Fine," she allows. "Just be careful, alright? And come back here when you're finished."

Jim puts both hands on her shoulders and squeezes gently. "I will. Take care of the kid."

Joyce nods as a tear slips down her cheek. Jim disappears down the hall and Joyce steps in Jonathan's room to give Steve a watery smile. She brushes the tear off swiftly. "The boys just started watching Ghostbusters," she says. "Why don't we go join them?"

Steve swallows hard, wishes he didn't have to face the kids, but also doesn't want to be alone. Besides, he knows he's going to have to face the kids eventually; might as well get it over with now. They deserve the truth. "Okay," he says softly.

"Let me give you a hand," Jonathan says, crossing the room to help Steve off the bed.

Steve lets him, and together they walk to the TV room.

## 4. Chapter 4

Jim slams the door to his K5 Blazer and sits for a moment before starting the car.

The rain has let up, just slightly. He can still hear the raindrops falling heavily on the metal roof.

He takes some deep, measured breaths, trying to distance himself from the anger he feels in his gut. He's a little startled at how personal this feels. He barely knows the boy from Adam. He's never really even had a conversation with kid.

Steve Harrington. The guy who always manages to be around when the world's about to end.

He was dating Nancy Wheeler at one point, Jim thinks. He must've been, because they'd been together the night that Holland girl had been taken. They're not together anymore, though, because Jim knows for certain that Nancy is with Jonathan now.

Joyce has told him *that* much.

But that's how the kid fits in to all of this, he's pretty sure.

Jim also knows the family name. Harrington. Of Harrington & Associates. An international law firm that is *"uniquely placed to help our clients resolve their most complex legal challenges wherever they..."*

Blah, blah, blah. Jim's seen the commercials.

The truth is, Jim doesn't know much about the family. He couldn't pick Henry and the missus out of a line-up. They're a couple with a reputation, but they're never around to live up to it.

As for Steve, Jim knows he's good with the kids.

He'd seen him in action, the night El closed the gate. They'd all regrouped at the Byers' that night, and even though Steve's face was bashed in from that Hargrove kid, he was able to stay level-headed and help calm the younger kids when the adrenaline wore off and

fearpanic anxiety shock settled in.

From that alone, Jim knew he was a good kid.

*Knows* he's a good kid.

He curses under his breath and turns the key in the ignition.

xxx

It takes about fifteen minutes longer than it should to get to the Harringtons' place. Jim has to be creative with his route, as some of the roads are under inches of water.

Damn Hawkins and its susceptibility to flash floods.

But he does make it there. Eventually.

The house is more modern than Jim was expecting. It looks a little out of place in the fancy neighborhood, as most of the homes are a Victorian style.

"What the hell do these people do with all this space?" Jim mutters to himself as he throws the car in park at the base of the Harringtons' driveway.

Jim lets the car settle as he tries to get a read on the house of the man he's about to interrogate. All the lights on the main level are on, flat and soggy newspapers litter the drive, and the strangest thing – the front door is wide open.

Jim closes his eyes, can picture Steve running scared from the one place he's supposed to feel the safest. The anger that he's been trying so hard to suppress is bubbling back up inside of him.

When Jim reopens his eyes, he sees that it's 7:31 on the clock on his dash.

His shift was supposed to end at 7:00.

He's going to be late. Again.

But he knows El will understand this time.

He also knows that she's watching *Jeopardy!* right now, because she's made a habit out of it. God, he wishes he could be sitting on the couch with her, watching her watch *Jeopardy!* The total focus she has on the show is quite entertaining, as the majority of the topics go over her head. Jim finds it funny – the kinds of things that "stick." The kinds of things she's curious about.

*What's communism? Who's Rosa Parks? Where's the Goseck Circle?* are among some of the questions El has directed Jim's way.

He's going to have to pull his father's old encyclopedias from the attic one of these days. El would absolutely love them.

xxx

"Mr. Henry Harrington!" Jim hollers through the house and pounds on the already open front door for good measure. He feels sick at the sight of blood on the tile floor – no doubt from that cut on Steve's foot.

Jim's taken off his police jacket and hat, and stands in his undershirt and khakis. He isn't the *Chief* right now. He's just Jim Hopper.

Sometimes he hates the system. He won't be able to take Henry down to the station tonight because he hasn't collaborated with CPS and doesn't have a warrant for the man's arrest.

But he's sure as hell going to tell the guy off.

Because fuck him, that's why.

Before getting the courage to walk up to the front door, Jim played out a little scenario in his head, of how the interaction might go.

*"Who are you? What do you want?"*

*"Jim Hopper. Here to tell you that your kid won't be coming back tonight. He's staying somewhere safe, with people who actually give two shits about him."*

*"You're telling me you kidnapped my son?"*

*"I'm telling you your son came to me for help, and he'll be staying far away from you until he decides if he wants to press charges."*

*"Fuck you."*

*"Fuck you, too."*

*"You have some gall showing up here. You come to MY house and threaten me? I ought to call the police."*

*"I am the police, asshole."*

...Probably not how it would ever happen in a million years, but Jim can dream, can't he?

He pounds on the door again. "Henry!" he shouts. "I'm here to talk about your son! Can you come to the door, please?"

The house is completely silent. Jim focuses his eyes down the long and dim entryway, where he can make out a small portion of the Harringtons' kitchen. He sees... is that a foot, limply tilted sideways, attached to an outstretched leg?

It's hard to be sure, because the kitchen wall is blocking the rest of his view, but Jim swallows hard; thinks he might have eyes on Henry.

He remembers that Jonathan mentioned that Steve said the man had been drunk when all of this went down. More likely than not, he's passed out in a drunken stupor.

Great. Now he's obligated to see if the piece of shit is okay. He can't just leave. Well, he could... No one would ever have to know he was here. But the man could have alcohol poisoning... he could need medical attention.

"Dammit," Jim mutters to himself. He steps into the home, leaves the door open behind him. "Henry, I'm coming in," he announces, more to fill the silence rather than warn the man he believes is unconscious.

His footfalls echo down the hallway as he approaches the kitchen cautiously. He's close enough now to see pizza boxes, beer bottles, soda cans... *everywhere*. But he can also see – on the kitchen counter – a bottle of prescription painkillers, tipped over.

Empty.

The stench of vomit hits him then and Jim's body gets there before his brain puts it all together. He feels numb all over, hair's sticking up on his arms.

"Oh, fuck. No, no, no, no, no..." he hears himself saying as he runs the rest of the distance to reach the man on the floor. He's frozen for a second as he stares, crouching, knees throbbing from the impact.

Henry's eyes are open.

Glazed over.

There's vomit on his sport coat.

His left hand is still holding onto another med bottle.

Jim knocks it out of his hand in his haste to try and find a pulse. He leans his head in close to check for breath sounds.

Nothing.

Jim pushes himself back, leans against island counter as his vision swims in front of him.

Henry Harrington is not just unconscious.

Henry Harrington is dead.



## 5. Chapter 5

When Jonathan and Steve enter the TV room, Joyce dismisses herself, mumbling something about hot chocolate. Will hops up from his spot on the couch so Steve can have a seat next to Dustin.

"Kid, that's okay," Steve tries. "You don't have to get up."

"I don't mind, really," Will says as he takes a seat on the floor next to Mike, who was propped up on his elbows.

"Yeah, Steve, don't worry about it," Jonathan says nudging him gently toward the couch. "Will chooses the floor over the furniture regularly. Besides, you need a proper seat." Jonathan settles into the recliner.

Steve's back is throbbing as he says it, so he ultimately agrees. "Okay," he gives in and sinks into the Byers' couch. "Hey, bud," he greets Dustin, giving the kid a soft jab in the ribs with his elbow.

"Hey," Dustin says quietly. He looks up at Steve pleadingly. "What's going on? Where'd Jim go?"

Steve swallows nervously. He knows that Dustin is looking for answers. And he deserves them. "There's some stuff going on with my dad," Steve tells him honestly, resting a hand on his knee. "We'll talk later, okay? I promise."

Dustin bites down on his lip and nods.

"Hey, Steve. Have you ever seen *Ghostbusters*?" Lucas leans across Dustin to ask the question.

"Nope," Steve admits.

"Well if you all would pipe down, we could start it," Mike says with an eye roll from the floor. He crawls to the VCR. "I'm gonna press play. Now shh."

"Mike takes *Ghostbusters* really seriously," Will whispers behind his hand.

Steve feels his lips tug into a smile. "I can see that." He reaches down to ruffle the kid's hair and looks across the room to meet Jonathan's eyes.

Jonathan raises his brows in a silent, *you good?*

Steve gives him a nod as Dustin leans his head against his shoulder. He thinks he's as good as he can be.

xxx

Steve finds himself drifting off during the movie. He might actually enjoy *Ghostbusters* if he was watching it at a time when he wasn't concussed or anticipating Hopper returning from his dad's. But right now his concentration – or lack thereof – isn't cutting it.

When Joyce re-enters the room with a tray full of mugs of hot chocolate, she says, "Can you boys pause it a minute? I have something I think you're going to want to hear."

Interest piqued, Will hurries to flip the VCR to pause.

Joyce starts passing out the mugs. "I just got off the phone with Mrs. Wheeler. She said that school is closed tomorrow, on account of the bus lot flooding. Said she just heard it on the news."

"Seriously?" Dustin says, and Steve can feel him buzzing with excitement when Joyce nods.

"High school, too?" Jonathan asks hopefully.

"Yup. All the schools in the district," Joyce confirms. "Mike, your mom also asked if you could spend the night, since the roads are so bad. I told her *all* of you can. Actually, I insist on it."

"So we're having a sleepover?" Lucas asks.

Joyce giggles. "Sure, yeah, if that's what you want to call it. I'll phone your parents and let them know." She kisses the top of Jonathan's head on her way back to the kitchen, but Steve sees her wringing her hands on the way and he knows she's worried about Jim.

Steve is too.

xxx

Joyce is an anxious woman, Steve decides.

After she phones the kids' parents, she's either standing just inside the front door, peering out the sidelight window, or she's out on the porch bundled up in that brown tattered blanket, smoking a cigarette.

Jim does make it back eventually, when there are about 15 minutes remaining in the movie.

"He's back," Joyce announces with a relieved sigh. "Thank God."

Steve hears the tires on the gravel and sits up straighter in his seat.

When Jim steps in the door, Joyce almost knocks him over in a bear hug. Steve gets it. She really cares for Jim. And that poor woman has been through a lot. From losing Bob to having her son possessed by some otherworldly mastermind, Steve can understand why she doesn't like having the people she cares about out of her sight. "What took you so long?" Joyce scolds into his shoulder.

"Sorry. I'm okay, Joyce," Jim apologizes and talks her down a little. "I'm fine." But then he dismisses her by gently pushing her away.

Jim meets Steve's eyes, nods towards the hallway. "We need to talk, son," he says gravely, and Steve's stomach does a funny little somersault.

He pushes himself off the couch, wincing at the twinge of pain in his lower back.

"Give us a minute, yeah?" Jim says to the others as he takes Steve by the arm and leads him back into Jonathan's bedroom.

"How you doin', kid?" Jim asks Steve, once he's closed the door and led him to the bed to sit down. He runs a shaky hand through his hair. "You okay?"

"You tell me," Steve says slowly, trying to read the man's appearance; he's getting a really awful vibe from this whole situation. "What's going on?"

Jim breathes out slowly, sits down next to Steve on the bed.

"Your father is dead."

xxx

It doesn't register.

Not really.

*Overdose. Painkillers. Too late.*

He hears the words that Jim is saying. Understands them, even.

But he can't process them.

Can't wrap his mind around the gravity of the situation.

Jim's voice seems far away, but the hand on his shoulder is heavy.

"I know this is a lot to take in. I know this isn't what you were expecting."

Steve feels himself nodding.

No shit, Chief.

God, he feels so numb. And sick.

His face is hot. His vision is fading in and out.

He lifts his head, tries to focus on Jim's face, but black dots are dancing in front of his eyes.

He blinks dazedly.

"Steve, kiddo?" The grip on his shoulder tightens. "Talk to me."

"Don't feel good," he hears himself muttering for an answer. He thinks

he might be on the verge of passing out. He wonders vaguely where his mom is. "My mom..."

"We'll find her," Jim's far-away voice says. "C'mon, lean forward Steve. Head down. You're okay. Breathe for me."

Steve does.

His father is dead.

And he doesn't know how he should fucking feel about that.

So he just breathes, and breathes, and breathes.

## 6. Chapter 6

"His dad *killed* himself?" Lucas repeats incredulously, and Dustin feels it like a punch in his gut.

Jim had seated them – Mike, Lucas, Will, and Dustin – on the couch and had disclosed to them what had been going on tonight. What had happened.

Steve asked him to.

Of course, Mrs. Byers and Jonathan were told the news first. Eighth graders were totally last on the totem pole in the hierarchy of "in the loop."

"Yes, he did," Jim confirms calmly, leaning forward in the armchair with his elbows on his knees. "He had been drinking and then he took some – a lot – of painkillers." Jim clears his throat. "The combination of the two was fatal."

An unnerving sort of silence lingers until Mike speaks up. "His dad hurt him, didn't he?" He's fidgeting relentlessly with his hands. "Steve? That's why he came here to begin with."

Jim nods. "I'm afraid so."

Jonathan and Mrs. Byers are hovering in the doorway. Mrs. Byers is holding a fist up to her mouth, trying not to cry.

Dustin can feel his heart beating in his chest. If Joyce and Jonathan are in the living room with them, that means that Steve is alone.

Steve shouldn't be alone.

Not now.

Dustin doesn't bother excusing himself. He just stands up and heads determinedly toward Jonathan's bedroom.

"Sweetie," Joyce tries to stop him. "He wants a few minutes to himself —"

Dustin doesn't acknowledge her in the slightest.

Screw that.

xxx

Dustin knocks, but he doesn't wait for Steve to welcome or dismiss him before he opens the door slowly.

Steve is sitting on Jonathan's bed holding a nearly finished Rubik's cube. He lifts his head when he hears the creak of the door.

"Hey," Dustin says timidly.

"Hey," Steve returns, voice wrecked. He beckons Dustin into the room by tapping the space on the bed beside him.

Dustin swallows thickly as he closes the door and settles into the spot next to Steve. He's relieved Steve didn't turn him away, but he has absolutely no idea what to say.

"Steve..."

Steve's quick to let him off the hook. "You don't have to say anything," he rushes to say, reaching to swipe at his eyes with his left hand. Dustin can see moisture on his cheeks. "This is so fucked up that I can't even..."

He trails off, tosses the Rubik's cube aside. He lets out a shuddering breath and leans forward to bury his face in his hands.

"Yeah," Dustin agrees. He licks his lips as he watches Steve. He hates that his usually perfectly quaffed hair is hanging limp and damp in front of his eyes. It makes him look that much more defeated.

They sit in silence for a while. Dustin reaches for the Rubik's cube and starts fiddling with it. Tries to think of something to break the resounding quiet.

Eventually he settles on: "So my mom got a new cat."

Steve drops his hands and turns his head to face Dustin. "Oh yeah?"

He sounds curious. His lips are even quirking up into a little smile.

Dustin will take that. He runs with it.

"We went down to the shelter this morning," he continues. "She picked out a Siamese kitten."

He's the cutest little thing. Tews, she named him.

"So she finally gave up on Mews, huh?"

Dustin nods. "Yeah. I didn't think she ever would."

Steve runs his hands through his hair. "You ever gonna tell her the truth?"

"Dude, *hell* no."

Dustin feels guilty about Mews, sure, but he figures his mom is better off *never* knowing how he met his demise.

Steve chuckles. Actually chuckles. It sounds tired, but not forced and it helps Dustin relax a bit. But then Steve realizes he's laughing and stops abruptly, a culpable look settling into his features.

It doesn't go unnoticed by Dustin.

"You can talk to me, you know," he says easily.

Steve shakes his head and tears start welling up in his eyes. "Not much to talk about," he says, lifting a shoulder up in a shrug. "My dad's dead. End of story."

"Steve, c'mon," Dustin tries gently. "You know you can't just brush this off."

"Well I can't deal with it either," he snaps, and Dustin recoils a bit at the harshness of his tone. Steve lets out a deep breath and pinches the bridge of his nose. "Sorry, man. I'm sorry. I just... I don't know how to feel right now."

"Overwhelmed?" Dustin offers.



Steve nods. "Yeah, that's probably a given." He curls his arms around his stomach, rocks back and forth slowly. "I can't believe he's really dead. I-I shouldn't have left."

Dustin's heart aches. He's not going to let Steve feel guilty about this. "Steve, Hopper said your dad was hurting you. Of course you should have left. I mean... Jesus, when you first showed up here—"

Dustin remembers the terrified look on Steve's face, the cuts up and down his arms, how he was soaking wet, out of breath...

Steve gulps hard. "I know," he says, voice teetering on the edge of breaking. "I know it looked really bad. God..." he's pinching the bridge of his nose again. Dustin can see his entire arm trembling, can see sweat beading on his brow. His other hand is still gripping his stomach tightly.

"Hey," Dustin grips Steve's shoulder gently, worried now. "You okay?"

Steve takes some measured breaths. "Feel like I'm gonna throw up," he answers when he finds his voice, trying to hold back the urge to gag. Dustin can hear him swallowing convulsively.

"Okay," he says tenuously calm. "Want to move to the bathroom?"

But Steve shakes his head. "I'm too dizzy," he breathes and sounds weak – like he's barely holding onto consciousness. "Fuck. Dustin..."

"I know, buddy," Dustin says. He lets go of Steve's shoulder and stands to frantically search Jonathan's room for something for Steve to puke in.

"Here," he says, grabbing ahold of Jonathan's full wastebasket – located under his desk – and dumps out all of the contents in his haste to make it back to Steve in time. "Here, Steve."

Steve can only whimper his thanks before grabbing the basin and giving into the sickness that had been plaguing him ever since Hopper had broken the news.

Dustin stands, hovering, looking away and trying to tune out the sounds of his friend's distress.

When it's all through and Steve is left panting and breathless, Dustin turns back to face him.

He turns and focuses his attention on Steve just in time to see him list sideways. Dustin lunges to catch him, feeling his own stomach drop into his toes.

There are remnants of blood and bile on Steve's lips and down his front.

Dustin starts hollering for help.

## 7. Chapter 7

Hopper drives slowly but methodically on the way to the hospital.

It's just him, Joyce, and Steve because Joyce wouldn't let anyone else come along (no matter how desperately Dustin and Jonathan tried).

If Steve could feel anything beyond the overpowering nausea, dizziness, and shock, he thinks he would feel relieved.

He's pretty sure he's hit rock bottom and he appreciates the reprieve of witnesses.

Currently, he's hunched over a grocery bag in the back seat, trying his damndest not to throw up again. Joyce is sitting in the front seat, but she's reaching behind her to keep a hand on Steve's knee.

"You're okay, sweetie. You're going to be just fine."

No, Steve doesn't think he will be. Because he doesn't think he cares *at all* what happens from this point forward. And he knows that's bad – like... off the rails, wheels spinning, crash and burn *bad*.

But he just doesn't care.

He doesn't *care*.

"Steve," Jim says softly. "Tell us again."

Steve spits into the bag, takes a deep breath, and recites the date dutifully.

"Good," Jim praises and looks in the rearview mirror to meet Steve's eyes. "We're almost there."

xxx

Déjà vu is not at all fun to experience when said déjà vu is occurring at the hospital.

Once again, Steve finds himself sitting in emergency room triage for

the second time in two weeks.

Last time, it was just him and Nancy. Steve doesn't remember much about it (thank *God*, because it was probably awkward having his now and then ex-girlfriend tending to him while he learned the extent of his concussion), but he does remember being here. He remembers the noise, the smells.

He feels over-stimulated which does absolutely no favors for the nausea gnawing at his gut.

Hopper is standing behind his chair with a grounding hand holding onto his neck and Joyce is sitting beside him, holding one of those emesis basins in her lap in case Steve needs it and a cup of water that Steve hasn't felt brave enough to try.

"What time is it?" he asks, when it occurs to him that he has absolutely no idea.

"Little after 10:30," Jim answers, without looking at his watch, which tells Steve he's been keeping an eye on it this whole time.

"Don't you have to get home...?" Steve asks him, leaving the *to El?* unsaid, because they're in public and who knows who could be listening.

"No, it's alright, kid. I'm not leaving until you're seen by a doctor."

Steve bites down on his lip because he feels like a goddamn burden.

He knows how much Jim hates being away from El, especially ever since she closed the gate. He knows that had taken a lot out of her; she still has a long recovery before she's back to 100%.

Steve's starting to think he has a long recovery, too.

xxx

Puking blood evidently trumps a concussion because Steve is seen by a doctor within 30 minutes, which is unheard of in the Hawkins ER.

He sits quietly while Jim and Joyce explain to the doctors what has

been going on, from the time Steve had gotten a concussion, courtesy of Billy Hargrove, to now (sans Shadow Monster and Demodogs). Every now and then Steve will answer a question directed at him, but for the most part he lets Jim and Joyce do the talking.

He just doesn't have the energy.

xxx

Ninety minutes and a glut of tests and imaging later, the doctors rule out the possibility of an internal bleed. Best conclusion they can come to is that the blood in Steve's vomit stemmed from the nose bashing that he had endured from Hargrove. Post-nasal drip, hemo-style.

Not the wildest of assumptions considering Steve hasn't gone even two days without a nosebleed since the blow.

Now, Steve has been transferred out of the ER and admitted to the medical unit for observation overnight. He's severely dehydrated (apparently drinking only cheap beer for an entire week will do that to you, plus prolonged vomiting stints) and he's been through "trauma," and they want to make sure he's emotionally stable before they release him.

Jesus.

Good luck with that, people.

Steve feels the opposite of emotionally stable as he lies on his hospital bed and listens to Joyce's end of the conversation while she calls Jonathan and the kids to give them an update.

Hopper left once Steve was settled with the promise of returning first thing in the morning.

So now it's just Steve and Joyce – she insists on staying the night on the pullout cot – which makes Steve feel loved, vulnerable, and smothered all at once.

The nausea has finally subsided, now that they've got him hooked on an IV and there are anti-nausea meds pumping through his system.

But the queasiness in his gut has been replaced with a lump in his throat.

On the outside, everything feels still now.

Quiet.

But on the inside, Steve feels so keyed up he can barely stand it.

His father is dead. He's *dead*, and moments before he died he drove Steve out of the house. (He can still hear the beer bottles shattering over his head.) His father is dead, and Steve can still feel the twinge of pain in his back that *he* caused. (It makes him feel sick all over again.) His father is dead, and his mother is God knows where, completely oblivious to the news. (He seriously can't handle this.)

"Steve, sweetheart?" Joyce's voice breaks into his inner turmoil.

"Yeah?" he croaks, and turns his head to face her.

She gives him a pitying smile, and reaches to brush some tears away from his cheeks that he hadn't even known were there. "Do you think you can drink a little water now?"

Steve licks his lips, nods, and hoists himself up to accept the cup she's holding out to him.

"Do you need to talk, Steve?" she asks kindly, almost knowingly, as he takes a few sips and it occurs to Steve that Joyce knows – to some extent – what he is going through. She recently lost Bob, and her grief is still palpable.

Steve clears his throat. He doesn't want to encumber her with even *more* heartache. She has enough on her plate.

He also doesn't feel like talking. Not now. He feels like *sleeping*. Sleeping is the best coping mechanism out there. He just doesn't know if his brain will turn off enough to allow it.

"Actually, Mrs. Byers.... I-I think I just want to try and go to sleep, if that's okay."

"Of course it is," she responds. "I know you must be exhausted. Do you want to take something to make falling asleep easier?" she asks. "We can see if your nurse can give you something."

Yes, God bless her, that's exactly what he wants. "Yeah, I-I think that would help," Steve says. "Thanks, Mrs. Byers."

"You're welcome," she says as she presses the button to page the nurse. Then she squeezes Steve's arm gently and says, "And call me Joyce, hon."

## 8. Chapter 8

Joyce surprises herself by falling asleep, despite her worry for Will, despite her grief about Bob, despite her feelings for Jim, despite how uncomfortable the cot is, and despite her absolute and utter heartbreak about Steve's situation.

She sleeps soundly, so soundly that she has drool dribbled down her chin. So soundly, that when she wakes up, she actually feels guilty for sleeping so hard, especially when she's greeted by the soft keening sounds of Steve Harrington.

He's not awake. He's sleeping too. But he's dreaming. Having a nightmare, probably, as he twists and turns in his bed, the hospital sheet clinging sloppily to his clammy skin.

He's moaning soft protests, sounding for all the world like her Will, and Joyce won't let him go on like that. She wipes her mouth on her sleeve and then reaches her arm out to give the boy's shoulder a gentle shake. "Steve, honey," she says softly.

He jolts awake, disoriented and frantic. "Mom?" he says, confused.

"No, Steve, it's Joyce, sweetheart." She smiles at him, calm and collected because she's used to waking scared kids up from nightmares and having them stare right through her.

"Joyce..." Steve repeats and pushes himself up into a half-seated position. He swallows hard and blinks a few times as he takes in his surroundings.

"Do you know where you are?" Joyce asks him. "Do you remember...?"

Steve blows out some air and pinches the bridge of his nose. "Yeah," he breathes. "Yeah, I remember. Sorry." He runs a hand over his face. "I was having a nightmare?"

Joyce nods. "Sounded like."

The problem is, she's just woken him up and now he's in another



nightmare. A real one.

Steve pushes himself up the rest of the way, with quite a bit of effort – wincing – and lifts his arm up to look at the watch on his left wrist.

Based on the fact that it's starting to get light outside, Joyce guesses it's around 7:00. Steve confirms that when he tells her it's 7:10.

"I think I slept the whole night," Steve says thoughtfully. "I-I didn't think I would."

"You must've needed it," Joyce tells him. That's how she justifying her seven hours. But she also thinks the sleeping pills the nurse gave to Steve might have played a part in his successful slumber.

"Did you get some sleep too?" Steve asks. "That cot doesn't look very comfortable."

Joyce's heart tugs at the fact that Steve is so concerned about her well-being. "I got plenty of sleep, hon. You don't have to worry about me." She reaches for the kid again, this time to palm his forehead to check for fever on his flushed face; she finds that his skin is cool to the touch and relaxes a little. "How are you feeling?"

"I don't know," he answers softly. "I think... I think I'm okay." He lets out a sigh. "But my back, uh, it really hurts."

Joyce closes her eyes briefly, sick at the memory of Steve disclosing everything his father had put him through last night. She runs her hands through Steve's messy mop of hair, tries to make it look a little more presentable. "And what about your head?" she asks, because she can't forget the Billy-Hargrove-induced concussion.

Steve just shrugs, which is enough to let Joyce know that it probably hurts, but that Steve has grown used to it in the past couple of weeks.

"Your stomach?"

Steve looks down. "A little uneasy," he admits, and more red rushes to his cheeks. "Mrs. Byers—" he starts.

"Joyce," she corrects.

Steve's face reddens further. "Joyce," he amends. "Do you think they're going to make me stay here?"

Joyce swallows hard, because yes, she thinks they might. "I think they'll reassess your condition today," she tells him. "And make a decision from there."

Steve nods. "I need to get ahold of my mom," he says, voice cracking slightly. "God, she... she doesn't even know." He presses on his eyelids. "And don't I need to... like... start making arrangements for... for my...?"

Joyce puts her hand on top of the kid's, tries her best to be comforting. "You have time," she says softly, regarding his father. "You don't have to think about that now. You can let your mom handle that, or the two of you can handle it together, once she gets back in the States."

Steve's biting down, hard, on his quivering lip. He nods. "My m-mom left a number on the fridge," he says, like he's just remembering. "To the hotel t-they were staying in."

"I have it."

Jim's voice startles them both and they turn to see him standing in the doorway, a duffle bag slung over his shoulder. "Hey, kid. Joyce," he greets gruffly as he steps in the room and pulls up an armchair to join the conversation. He drops the bag beside him. "You get any sleep last night?"

Joyce squeezes Steve's hand. "Yeah, we both did."

Jim looks pleased with that answer. "Good."

"You have that number?" Steve asks Hopper.

Jim nods and digs around in his pocket for it. "I grabbed it last night when I was over at your house. I also grabbed you some clean clothes," he says, nudging the duffle bag with his foot. "But with everything going on last night, I forgot to give them to you." He hands a wrinkled piece of paper over to Steve.

Joyce has always admired Jim's ability to think ahead and she is so thankful that he's here right now.

"Thanks, Chief," Steve says earnestly. He clutches the paper tightly in his hand. "Uh, w-what time is it in Paris?"

Joyce doesn't know, so she looks to Hopper. He glances down at his watch. "I'm not positive, but I think they're about six hours ahead of us. So going on 1:30?"

"Should I try calling her now?" Steve asks.

"No," Hopper says. "I want to know about you first, kid. How are you doing?"

Joyce sees Steve shrink into himself a little, so she answers for him. "His back is really bothering him and his stomach's still a little upset. I don't think he's running a fever."

Steve nods. "Yeah, so now you're up to speed. C-Can I have the phone?"

"Wait, just hold on a second," Hopper says. "Let me take a look at—"

"No," Steve says firmly, and Joyce can hear an edge of panic in his voice. "I-I need to call her. Please. I need to get it over with."

Jim locks his eyes uncertainly with Joyce. "Give him the phone, Hop," she tells him. She can hear the desperation in Steve's voice and she knows it won't go away until he gets ahold of his mother.

Jim relents and tugs the phone toward Steve. "Kid, if you want, I can talk to her..." He's trying to save the boy some pain, trying to keep him from having a difficult conversation. But Joyce knows he won't take the bait. She's pretty sure Jim knows it too.

Steve shakes his head. "It has to be me."

He lets out a deep breath, looks down at the crumpled piece of paper, and starts to dial.

## 9. Chapter 9

Steve's heart is pounding in his chest. How in the world is he going to tell his mother that his father is dead? That he killed himself?

As the phone rings, Steve holds his breath.

Jim and Joyce hold theirs along with him.

It seems to ring forever, and then, "Allô?"

Steve doesn't recognize the female voice that answers. He was expecting his mother or no answer at all. "Uh, hi," he says. "Is Paula Harrington there?"

"Quoi?" The woman sounds angry. "Je ne parle pas anglais."

Steve bites down on his lip as emotion swells in his chest. Steve doesn't know how to respond. He holds the receiver into his chest and says to Jim and Joyce, "It's some lady. I don't think she knows where my mom is."

Jim holds his hand out expectantly. "Let me have the phone."

Steve hands it over.

"Allô," he greets the woman on the other line. "Je voudrais parler à Madame Harrington."

Joyce raises her eyebrows as Jim effortlessly carries out a fluent French conversation with the mystery person on the other line. She and Steve listen closely as Jim concentrates fiercely on what the woman is saying.

"Ah," Jim says. "D'accord. Merci."

When he hangs up the phone, he's wearing a forlorn expression on his face. "Your mother checked out of the hotel this morning, kid. That was the maid."

"That's a good thing, right?" Joyce asks, giving Steve's hand a gentle

squeeze. "She probably checked out because she's planning on flying home."

Jim nods. "Probably." He breathes out deeply. "Sorry, kid. I know you wanted to get that over with."

Steve swallows hard. "Yeah." He knows it sounds cowardly, but breaking the news over the phone seems easier than breaking the news in person – though neither of them sound like a walk in the park. He runs a shaky hand through his hair and collapses back into the pillows. Nothing he can do about it now. So, instead, he asks Hopper, "Where did you learn French?"

Jim chuckles humorlessly. "Diane's parents were French," he answers and reaches up to rub his eyes.

Steve looks at Joyce. "Who's Diane?" he mouths.

"Ex-wife," she mouths back.

Steve feels his mouth form an "O" shape.

When Jim drops his hands, he asks, "Have they brought you breakfast yet?"

Steve shakes his head.

"Are you hungry? When's the last time you ate?"

Steve doesn't feel hungry at all, but he knows he should. The closest he's come to eating a proper meal in the past two weeks has been cheap pizza from Mario's and then that stale grilled cheese he choked down yesterday afternoon – before his dad got home.

Was that really only yesterday?

Steve figures there's too much dread and guilt occupying his stomach for him to feel much of anything else.

"I'm not hungry," he tells Hopper softly.

When breakfast is served 20 minutes later, he ends up swallowing

down some eggs anyway to appease his apparently adopted (overbearing) parents.

xxx

To his pleasant surprise, Steve is released from the hospital later that morning. Jim had to get to work, so he had gone shortly after the riveting breakfast consumption, which means that Joyce had to call Jonathan to come pick them up.

"I guess I should go h-home then, right?" Steve says to Joyce, when they're waiting in the lobby for Jonathan to pull up. His voice breaks on the word home because that is the absolute last place he wants to go. But... "I need to wait for my m-mom."

"Absolutely not," Joyce huffs. "You'll stay at our place, sweetheart. Someone needs to keep an eye on you. I'll have Hopper stop by your house today and leave your mom a note about where she can reach you when she gets home."

Steve relaxes a little, but he still feels like he needs to protest because he is not – shouldn't be – the Byers' burden. "I-I'd be okay," he tells her, but it doesn't sound convincing even to him. "You don't have to —"

"Not another word about it, Steve," she says gently, and tucks a stray hair behind his ear. "It's no trouble."

xxx

Jonathan hugs Steve when he arrives.

It wasn't something Steve was expecting. He helps Steve out of the wheelchair, and once he's upright, Jonathan pulls him into a tight embrace and it feels so warm and welcome that Steve can almost ignore the aching pain in his back. "I'm really glad you're okay, Steve," Jonathan says before letting go, and then he and Joyce are helping him into the backseat of their car, where Will is sound asleep against the window.

Steve thinks he might start crying from their generosity and kindness alone.

Forget everything else.

xxx

"Did he sleep okay last night?" Joyce asks Jonathan about Will, as she looks back at her son from the passenger seat.

Jonathan shakes his head. "I think he was afraid of having a nightmare in front of the others. There wasn't a whole lot of sleeping going on anyway. The kids were worried about you, Steve." Jonathan meets Steve's eyes in the rearview mirror. "You're going to have to call Dustin when we get back."

Steve had figured as much. "Yeah, I will," he says.

xxx

"I've been bunking with Will anyway," Jonathan tells him as he leads him into his bedroom, insisting that Steve stay there. "He sleeps better if I'm close."

Steve wants to say, *don't worry about me, I can just take the couch*. But he also wants the door, the privacy. He wants the bed. And he hates how selfish that is.

He cards a hand through his hair, suddenly overcome *again* with an immense amount of gratitude for Jonathan. His eyes begin to overflow with unwelcome tears.

Jonathan notices. "What, Steve?" he asks, placing a gentle hand on Steve's shoulder.

Steve shakes his head because he isn't sure how to put it into words. "I don't know," he manages to say. "Just... thank you. I don't know what I would've done if..." he trails off, feeling exposed as his hands hang limply against his sides. "I'm just sorry about all this. You guys have so much going on already, with B-Bob and Will. I-I shouldn't have come here l-last night."

"Hey," Jonathan says and then he's hugging him again and Steve wonders vaguely if this is something he should start getting used to. "I'm glad you did."

There's nothing but honesty in those words.

Jonathan releases Steve and nudges him toward the bed. "You should probably get some rest before you call Henderson," he tells him, a nicer way of saying *you should probably pull yourself together*.

Steve sinks into Jonathan's mattress and nods. He can still feel wetness on his cheeks but doesn't have the energy to reach up to wipe it off.

"And after you call Henderson, maybe you can call Nancy?" Jonathan suggests quietly, still hovering by his bedroom door.

Steve's head snaps up, because up until this point, he'd forgotten that there was supposed to be an element of tension (*resentment?*) between them.

"I - uh - I might have told her what was going on, and she's really worried about you," Jonathan stutters over his words.

He looks so apologetic, guilty even, and Steve would probably laugh if he had it in him.

"Byers, don't worry about it, man" he says, and he means it. "She would've heard it from Mike anyway. I'll call her."

Jonathan gives him a grateful smile. "Okay," he says, slowly backing out the door. "I'll... I'll give you a minute."

"Thanks," Steve says.

When the door clicks closed, Steve leans forward, holds his head in his hands, and tries to get a grip on his new reality.



## 10. Chapter 10

She's looking down at her tuna salad sandwich her mom packed for her and doesn't have the appetite to take even one bite. She's thinking about her conversation with Steve last night, which consisted of Steve reassuring her he was okay and Nancy not even close to believing him.

"Nance," she hears Jonathan say from their small table in the corner of the cafeteria. "You need to eat."

She registers what he says, but chooses to ignore it. "I can't stop thinking about him," she discloses softly, then realizes how that must sound. "I mean, not in *that* way, but..."

"I know," Jonathan says quickly, reaching across the table to rest his hand on hers. "I can't stop thinking about him either."

"Did he see the news this morning?" she asks, because all the local channels were covering the story of Henry Harrington's apparent suicide. Nancy's entire family had been glued to the television screen that morning.

Jonathan shakes his head. "He was still asleep when I left this morning."

"Good." Nancy glances around the cafeteria, wonders how many conversations are involving Steve and his overdosing, big-time-lawyer father. "When's he coming back to school?"

"I don't know," Jonathan tells her. "I think he'll need some time. He's staying with Will today... My mom couldn't take off any more work."

"That'll be kind of weird, won't it?" Nancy asks. "He barely knows Will."

"He barely knows any of us," Jonathan points out, and Nancy realizes it's the truth. The Byers kept to themselves and liked it that way, and the only time Steve ever really had *any* sort of interaction with them was when the world was about to end. "But he still showed up on our

doorstep Sunday night," Jonathan says. "Which when you think about it, just shows how desperate he was."

Nancy's stomach sinks. She doesn't want to think about that. Steve used to have dozens of friends... before her. Before she turned his life upside down (quite literally) and then stomped on his heart like it didn't even matter. Since, Steve has lost friends like Tommy and Carol and all the people that came along with "being on the top." He's no longer King Steve, and no one who used to have his back does anymore.

"Anyway, it shouldn't matter about Will," Jonathan continues, breaking Nancy out of her pity session for Harrington. "Steve's good with the kids."

*I may be a pretty shitty boyfriend, but turns out I'm actually a pretty damn good babysitter.*

Nancy feels her lips curve up a little bit. "I know, right? Who would've guessed?"

"Not me." Jonathan gives her a sad little smile then squeezes her hand. "Will you please eat something?" he presses again. He nudges his tray closer to her. "Just some of my fries or something, Nance. Please."

Nancy knows he won't let it rest so she grabs a couple of his fries to satisfy him. As she chews, her eyes wander to two tables away, where Billy Hargrove is sitting by himself. He normally sits with Tommy and Carol, but they're nowhere in sight today. Billy doesn't have lunch; he's working on something. Homework maybe.

Nancy wonders if he'd been listening to their conversation. Hargrove always seems to be lingering around them these days. He's always just *there*. But he's left them alone, kept his trap shut.

Until today.

xxx

She closes her locker to find Billy leaned up on the other side, smirking coolly, despite his busted and bruised face he'd been

sporting the past couple of weeks.

*"Jesus, Harrington. Did you really do that much damage to Hargrove's face?" Jonathan had asked on their first day back. "He looks worse than you."*

*"I don't really remember it, Byers. But... I don't think so." Steve shrugged it off. "He gave me what-for for essentially no reason, so it wouldn't surprise me if he got tangled up in another fight."*

*"Probably got what he deserved," Nancy had agreed, and that had been the end of it. Billy Hargrove was so far down on their list of priorities that it was almost laughable.*

"What do you want?" she asks Billy now, clutching her books tightly to her chest.

"Just wanted to get something straight," he answers.

"And that would be...?" Nancy's eyes flicker to the doorway of her next class. She does not have time to be standing here and talking to this low-life.

"Did I seriously hear that Harrington - your *ex-boyfriend* - is shacking up at your *current* weirdo boyfriend's house?"

Instead of dignifying him with an answer, Nancy exhales loudly. "You are such an ass," she tells him pointedly.

Billy raises his eyebrows, amused by her remark. "No arguments here," he says, almost proud. "But you do realize that's gonna be weird, right?"

Yes, Nancy does realize that, and maybe that's why she feels heat on her cheeks. "What's it matter to you?" she challenges. "Why do you care?"

"I don't," Billy says through gritted teeth. "I just—"

"What?" Nancy asks, taking a step closer to him, and makes her voice as threatening as possible. "You just wanted to come over here and make fun of his screwed-to-hell situation at my expense? Don't you

think you've done fucking enough?"

Billy's face clouds over with something Nancy can't quite put her finger on. Regret? Guilt? Whatever it is, it doesn't last. "Just because his dad decided to off himself, it doesn't change the fact that Harrington had what was coming to him," Billy growls at her.

"So that's it, huh?" Nancy says, her chin jutting out a little. "Not even an ounce of remorse?"

Billy shakes his head, tightens his jaw, won't look her in the eye.

Nancy lets her gaze linger on him a moment longer. When he doesn't cave, she says, "I'm not scared of you Billy Hargrove. And I don't buy this act your selling."

She walks past him then, doesn't plan on giving him any more of the time of day. But...

"You should be scared of me."

He says it softly. Sadly. It's not hostile or intimidating and it sounds so unlike Billy Hargrove that Nancy wonders if she was meant to hear it at all. It stops her dead in her tracks.

When she turns around, he's making his way out the front doors.

He doesn't look back.

## 11. Chapter 11

Steve's entire body aches as he stands beneath the warm spray of the shower, and he revels at the warmth and gentle massage the water flowing over his skin brings.

As the water rushes over him, he peels away the bandages on his arms and winces slightly as the water connects with his exposed flesh.

Steve closes his eyes and tries to forget how he got those cuts in the first place; waits for the pain to go away.

(He's starting to think it never will.)

He feels his throat get tight with emotion and he wills himself not to start crying again.

Crying wouldn't do any favors for the pounding headache he'd woken with.

*He's not worth your tears anyway.*

Instead, Steve busies his mind by reading the back of the generic shampoo bottle the Byers' have for him to use. They don't even have conditioner.

It shouldn't surprise him. Both Jonathan and Will have thin, flat hair that they wear in a bowl cut. Clearly, upscale hair products are not an essential.

When twenty minutes have passed Steve forces himself to get out of the shower because he doesn't want to jack up the Byers' water bill and use up all of their hot water.

But he would've stayed in that shower all day long if he could.

He slips a towel around his waist and takes a seat on the closed lid of the toilet. He takes a moment just to breathe.

Then he reaches down into his duffle and pulls out some old jeans

and a long-sleeved shirt that Hopper had brought him. All the clothes that Jim grabbed are rarely ever worn, but Steve hadn't done any laundry while his parents were gone, so he was left with the clothes he wore during his freshman year of high school.

He pulls his boxers on, then his jeans, but he holds off a moment on the shirt. He wipes the fogged mirror clean above the sink with his towel and leans forward over the counter to get a good look at his reflection.

The bruises on his face are almost cleared up, with the exception of some faded black around his right eye. Steve bites down on his lip and holds his breath as he turns his bare back against the mirror and cranes his neck to get a look.

He audibly gasps at the purple, blue, and black discoloration there.

"Oh, God," he mumbles and subconsciously reaches a hand to lightly touch the atrocity. He flinches with pain at the contact and his vision starts to fade. He clambers back to the toilet and sits down heavily.

He's avoided looking at the damage until now.

"Jesus," he breathes and buries his face in his hands. "Fuck."

How had his life gone downhill so fast?

He doesn't even recognize it anymore; he doesn't recognize *himself*.

He doesn't feel like Steve Harrington. It's like he's a stranger in his own skin and everything that's been happening doesn't belong to him. A year ago, Steve thought his entire life was figured out. He had plans for college, a future with Nancy, friends his own age...

How in the world did he wind up with a dead (abusive) father and none of the things he was so content with last year?

*How?*

Not to mention that the whole concept of the Upside Down is still looming, and Steve is having a hard time believing that it's really over. Gate closed aside.

He hates that he's crying again.

xxx

A knock on the door startles him.

"Steve?" Little Byers' voice carries timidly through the door.

"Uh, yeah, just a sec," Steve calls back as he hastily threads his arms through the shirt and wipes his eyes on his sleeve.

Shit, he needs to pull himself together because Will had been possessed by a fucking shadow monster from another dimension and doesn't need to witness Steve having a meltdown. If anyone deserves to have meltdown, it's Will Byers.

*Not Steve.*

He runs his hands through his damp hair, stands, and pulls the door open. Will is pressed up against the hallway wall, waiting.

"Hey, sorry, kid," Steve says. "Did you need in here?"

Will shakes his head. "No, I was just..." he takes a deep breath. "My mom told me we needed to look after each other today, a-and you've been in there awhile, so I was just checking..."

He trails off softly, emulating nervousness like his brother.

Steve practically melts at the kid's earnest concern. "Oh, well I'm good, man," he says, and surprises himself at how nonchalant he sounds. "Nice to know you have my back."

Will smiles shyly. "Are you hungry?" he asks. "We have cereal."

Steve figures cereal is harmless enough. "Sure, that sounds alright."

"Good, because Jonathan told me to make you eat even if you said you weren't hungry."

"Oh, did he now?" Steve says as he follows Will into the kitchen.

"Yeah." Will pulls some bowls down from the cabinet while Steve

takes a seat at the kitchen table. "And I'm supposed to call Dustin when school's out later today and give him a full report." He grabs some spoons from the drawer and the milk from the fridge. The Frosted Flakes are already sitting on the table. "So I'm not the only one who has your back," he says with a soft smile as he sinks into the chair across from Steve.

He shakes some cereal into Steve's bowl and then his own. Steve pours the milk.

"Are you cold, kid?" Steve asks, because he notices that Will is wearing a hooded sweatshirt and sweatpants, but also a bathrobe.

"Not really. I just like to be warm," Will answers quietly with shrug. "T-The shadow monster liked it cold, so when I feel warm, I know he's really gone." He looks down at his bowl. "I know it's stupid, but it helps me remember that it's over. That I'm me again."

Steve is impressed by Will's ability to talk so openly about the shadow monster. He's sure Joyce, Jonathan, and the kids have all encouraged him to do just that. "I don't think that's stupid," Steve tells him. "I think it's smart."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I think we all have moments where we feel like we're sucked back into it. It's good to have ways to keep yourself grounded, you know?"

Will nods as he takes a bite of his cereal. "So what do you do?"

Steve blanches, because to be honest, he doesn't really have a coping mechanism. "I'll be real with you, kid. Mostly I'm just paranoid. I still sleep with my bat of nails."

*I'm gonna have to go back to get that,* Steve thinks to himself. *And my hairspray.*

"It must've been hard getting sleep when you were all by yourself in that house," Will says thoughtfully. "I don't know how you did it."

Steve gives him a shrug. "The concussion helped," he says with a



quirk of the lips.

Will smiles back, but it fades quickly. "I still need Jonathan to sleep with me. Sometimes Mom does too."

"Nothing wrong with that, kid," Steve assures him. He wouldn't mind having someone nearby at night himself.

"Yeah." Will brushes him off softly. He looks around the kitchen and sighs. "I'm getting tired of being holed up in here."

Steve's heart sinks for the kid. It must be hard staying home while all of his friends are at school. "I need to get my car back," he tells Will. "Then I could take you wherever you want to go. I'll ask Jonathan to drive me over there tonight. Maybe we can catch a flick tomorrow or something."

"That would be cool," Will says, a smile creeping onto his face. "Thanks."

Steve winks at him and looks down at his bowl. He takes his first bite of cereal.

It tastes like ash.

He almost gags on it, but doesn't.

The rest of the bites taste like ash, too. But Steve eats it. All of it.

It wouldn't be polite to waste the Byers' cereal.

xxx

Will is a quiet kid. They spend the morning side-by-side on the couch watching daytime television. They don't talk much, and Steve is grateful.

They both nod in and out of sleep.

It's kind of *exactly* what Steve needs.

Some time to just... not think.

Yes, sign him up for this.

xxx

It doesn't last.

A little after noon, there's a knock on the front door.

Both Will and Steve perk up and turn to look at each other.

"You expecting someone?" Steve asks with his eyebrows raised.

"I don't think so..." Will answers. "But sometimes Hopper stops by on his lunch break."

Steve relaxes a little. That had to be it. *Or maybe*, he thinks with an embarrassing amount of hope, *maybe it's my mom*.

"I'll get it," he tells Will, who's bundled up under a blanket and looks way too comfortable to get up.

"Kay," Will allows with a yawn and settles back into the couch.

Steve winces as he stands; his back and head doing him no favors. Then he crosses the short distance to the door and swings it open.

The wind gets knocked out of him as he processes the person standing on the stoop.

It is not his mother. Nor is it Jim Hopper.

It's Billy fucking Hargrove.

xxx

A couple of moments pass with the two of them just staring at each other.

Billy stands on the stoop in his signature attire; a jean jacket complementing a tucked in, deep-colored shirt unbuttoned halfway. It's his posture that makes him look disheveled; hunched shoulders, bruises on his face.

Fresh bruises covering old bruises.

Steve wonders how many fights Hargrove had been in the past two weeks because Steve knows *he* hadn't been the one to color Billy's face like that.

Just the sight of him makes Steve's gut churn. "Why are you here?" Steve asks when he finds his voice, and hates how timid he sounds.

"Heard you were here," Billy answers back, then reaches up to scratch the back of his head. "I, uh..."

*He looks uncomfortable*, Steve realizes as Billy shifts on his feet. He decides to use that to his advantage.

Steve puffs his chest out and rolls up his sleeves. He makes his voice as threatening as possible. "For the love of... Did you come here to apologize?" He takes a step closer. "Or go for round two, huh? What?"

Billy actually takes a step back at the tone of his voice, but says, "No, I'm not here to fucking apologize. I'm just here to get something that belongs to me."

By this time, Will has appeared by Steve's side to figure out what all the ruckus is about. "What's going on?" he asks Steve, hovering close.

"Kid, maybe you've seen it," Billy says to Will, ignoring Steve's minatory nature completely. "I-I lost a necklace. An iron necklace with an oval pendant." Billy's hand is pressed against his chest where Steve remembers seeing it hang. He always wears that necklace.

"We have it," Will says quietly. He looks up at Steve. "My mom found it a couple a days ago in the kitchen."

Steve says, "Go get it," to Will, just as Billy says, "Look, it was my m-mom's and I just need it back, okay?" His voice is reaching an edge of panic; he sounds frantic.

"Hargrove, relax, I told the kid to go get it," Steve placates. Steve squeezes Will's shoulder and nods in the direction of the kitchen.

"Oh," Billy breathes and eases up a little. He had assumed that Steve

wouldn't let him have it back out of revenge or spite. But Steve just wanted Billy gone, and he knew giving the pendant back would accomplish that. "Okay."

Billy jams his hands in his pockets while they wait for Will to return. He looks Steve up and down. Steve can *actually see* him trying to decide if he should offer condolences or what-the-fuck-ever. He never thought he'd see sympathy - or maybe even empathy? - on Billy Hargrove's face.

"What the hell happened to your arms?" Billy growls instead.

Steve doesn't dignify him with an answer. Just pulls his sleeves back down and crosses his arms across his chest. "What the hell happened to your face?" he returns.

Billy just shakes his head, no plans of giving Steve an answer.

"Here," Will says as he returns, holding the necklace out to Billy. "I-I think the chain might be broken."

"Doesn't matter," Billy says, taking it from the kid and squeezing it gently in the palm of his hand. "Uh... thanks," he adds eyeing Will and Steve nervously. It sounds all wrong. Steve wonders if words of gratitude have ever crossed his lips.

He expects him to leave, now that Billy got what he came for, but he lingers on the step.

Steve's about to tell him to shove off — *why is he still here?* — when Billy says, "Where's your BMW, pretty boy?"

Steve swallows. "Why do you care?" he challenges.

Billy shrugs, shuffles his feet. "It still at your place?"

"Yeah." *Where else would it be, asshole?*

"You want a ride to pick it up?"

Steve stares, not entirely comprehending what's going on here. "You offering?"

Hargrove runs a hand through his hair, then blows out a huff of air like Steve's inconveniencing *him*. "Yeah. You can take it or leave it. I don't give a damn."

"Why?" Steve wonders, unable to wrap his mind around this seemingly civil gesture from the guy who beat his face in two weeks ago.

"I don't have anything better to do," Billy states, matter-of-fact. "Do you want your fucking car back or not?"

Steve looks down at Will. "I was just going to ask Byers..." he says, mulling it over, startled that he's even considering it. But he remembers what Will said earlier about being holed up in the house. "What do you say, kid? You wanna get outta here for a bit?"

"Yeah," Will says carefully. "Yeah, I'd really like that. But..." he sizes Hargrove up, not really trusting. "I-It's up to you."

Billy raises his eyebrows, to all appearances uncaring one way or the other.

"Okay," Steve says, because he's going a little stir-crazy too, and knowing full well he might regret it later. "Yeah, we'll take a ride."

Hargrove smirks and turns on his heel.

"Haul ass, then."

## 12. Chapter 12

*"I didn't know," Max had blubbered, standing at Billy's doorway. "I didn't know he would do that to you."*

*Billy could barely hear her over the pounding in his head as he sat, stunned, on his bedroom floor. He could feel blood running down his cheek.*

*"Is he gone?" he grit out, keeping his head down.*

*"Yeah. Yeah, he took the truck."*

*"And Susan?"*

*"In the kitchen, washing up dishes."*

*Billy grunted. Classic Susan, pretending that nothing even happened.*

*"Do you... I could get you some ice?" Max offered, her voice small.*

*It made Billy's blood boil. This was all her fault, anyway.*

*Except it wasn't, and he knew it.*

*Neil had never laid a hand on him in front of her until now, and when she'd asked about the cuts and bruises, Billy would say he got into it with some punk at school. So she really didn't know Neil would do this to him.*

*But Neil did this to him because of her.*

*Because she didn't come home until five-frickin'-o'clock in the morning, looking all kinds of traumatized. Billy couldn't be bothered to figure out why right then.*

*"I'm fine, Maxine," he growled, grasping for the necklace around his neck that wasn't there. "Just... Just leave me the hell alone, would you?"*

*"Okay, yeah," she whispered as she retreated. "Sorry."*

*She closed the door behind her. Billy grabbed the old shirt lying beside him*

*on the floor, pressed it to his face, and crawled into bed.*

*xxx*

*Max did leave him alone.*

*And he left her alone.*

*That was what they both had asked of each other.*

*Susan had grounded Max for three weeks, and Billy was to bring her straight home after school. Which is what he did.*

*They wouldn't speak a word to each other in the car, and they'd both close themselves in their rooms when they got home.*

*But late Sunday night, Max knocked on his bedroom door.*

*"What?" Billy allowed, tossing his skin mag aside.*

*Max swung the door open; she was biting down, hard, on her lip, and rocking back and forth on her feet. She was holding a walkie-talkie in her hand.*

*"What?" Billy said again.*

*"Um. Steve Harrington's dad killed himself tonight."*

*Billy's breath left him. "What? Where'd you hear that?"*

*Max shook the walkie-talkie slightly. "Lucas just told me."*

*Billy closed his eyes. Jesus. If Neil knew she was talking to Sinclair... "So what are you telling me for?"*

*Max shrugged and looked down at her feet. "Lucas said the Byers took Steve to the hospital. I-I guess... I guess he and his dad got into a fight before... it happened. Lucas said he's in bad shape."*

*Billy swallowed hard, wishing Max hadn't told him any of this. He's not supposed to feel bad for Steve Harrington; but he does. He can't feel it in the tightness of his chest. "I don't know why you think I give two shits about him," Billy told her, lying to himself through his teeth. "Did you not*

*see what I did to him? I mean, are you blind? I put him in the hospital myself."*

*The color drained from Maxine's face. "I saw," she whispered. "I just thought you'd want to know."*

*"Okay. Well, now I know." Billy picked up his magazine. "Get lost, Red."*

*Max looked dumbfounded as she lingered in the doorway. "You're no better than Neil, you know that?" she spat, before turning on her heel.*

*She let the door slam behind her.*

*It shook Billy to his very core.*

xxx

Maybe he's just curious.

At least, that's how Billy tries to swing it. Why else would he have offered a ride to Harrington, the guy who has - in part - made his life a living hell the past two weeks?

So much has transpired in those few short days. So much that Billy doesn't understand.

He thought he had Hawkins all figured out.

Boring town. Boring people.

But when he'd come to in the Byers' house that night, after being drugged up by freaking Maxine, he'd realized that he'd had it all wrong. There is some weird shit going down in Hawkins.

The wall-to-wall coverage of sloppily colored pieces of paper told him that much.

He wants to know why Maxine has been having nightmares ever since that night. She screams her fucking head off at ungodly hours; probably wakes up the entire neighborhood.

Not to mention the way that Byers, that Wheeler girl, and Steve all



huddle around their lunch table speaking in quiet tones and looking over their shoulders like they have some big secret to keep.

Billy's tired of it. He's done keeping to himself. He wants answers.

But that night isn't all he's curious about. Not anymore.

He's curious about what Harrington is going through; his state of mind. He wonders if it's truly hit him yet, wonders if he was even close to his father.

He wishes he didn't care. He's not supposed to care. He's made a point not to care about anyone or anything for *so long*.

Only this is different. He needs to care about this. He doesn't know how not to.

"So, are you like a full-time babysitter now?" he asks Harrington, flicking ash from his lit cigarette out the window with left hand. He glances in the rearview mirror at the Byers kid sitting in the backseat.

"I don't know, are you a personal chauffeur?"

Harrington's words are anything but laced with malice. He just sounds tired. "That's my house to the left," he adds, pointing lazily at a gray-sided house with an auburn door.

Billy pulls into the Harringtons' driveway and his eyes widen at what he sees on Steve's front stoop. There must be eight or more flowered plants sitting there.

"What the...?" Steve breathes at the spectacle.

Billy throws the car in park. He knows that Steve's dad was some kind of hot-shot lawyer, which is why the news of him passing was plastered all over his TV this morning. The neighborhood must be paying their respects.

"Have you... did you see the news this morning?" Billy asks him.

"No. But I take it the whole town knows." Steve's voice is rough. "I mean, you had to find out somehow, right?"

"I found out from Max," Billy says, letting his cigarette dangle between his teeth. "Sinclair radioed her."

"Max talks to you?" the kid pipes up from the back seat.

No, but... "She did about this," Billy answers over his shoulder, then turns his attention back on Harrington.

Steve is staring at his house like it's the absolute last place he wants to step foot into. He wipes his hands back and forth on his knees. "Okay. So, uh, I guess you can take off," he says timidly.

There's a beat of silence.

"You kind of need to get out of my car first," Billy points out with a smirk. He can tell Steve is stalling.

"Oh. Yeah..."

Harrington licks his lips and breathes out deeply. Then he kicks open the passenger door and the Byers kid follows suit. Steve bends down to talk to Billy through the window. His face is sweaty and ashen as he says, "Uh, thanks, Hargrove."

Billy scoffs. "Don't fuckin' thank me," he growls at him, because he beat this guy's head in two weeks ago and being *thanked* is the stupidest thing he's ever heard of. Ignoring the polite dismissal for what it is, Billy kills the engine and gets out of his car, too.

Will speaks what Harrington is thinking. "What're you doing?"

Billy isn't entirely sure why, but there's something in him that doesn't want Steve going into that house alone.

So he takes a long drag on his cigarette, shrugs, and says, "I want to see the King's castle."

## 13. Chapter 13

"Oh, for the love of — give me the fucking key, Harrington."

Billy says it after about 30 seconds of Steve fumbling to get the spare key from under the flower pot into the lock. His hands are shaking too bad.

Steve gives the key over wordlessly.

"This too much for you, champ?" Billy asks with a teasing tone as he slips the key into the lock and swings the door open effortlessly.

Steve doesn't bother to give an answer; he just shoves past Hargrove to inside. He doesn't understand why Billy is still *here*.

It doesn't matter. He has more important things to think about.

Like going through the mental checklist of everything he needs so that he doesn't have to come back here ever again.

The truth is, being home is really freaking hard. His dad threw beer bottles at his head here. His dad *killed* himself here.

He wonders if he'll make it out of here without losing it completely.

"Okay," Steve says, running his hands through his hair. "You guys can just... wait here." He motions around the foyer. "I need to grab my car keys and a few other things."

Will nods obediently, but Billy says, "No way. I want the grand tour."

He still has a lit cigarette hanging loosely between his teeth.

"Put that out," Steve tells him harshly. His dad doesn't — *didn't* — allow smoking in the house. "Or get out. What are you still doing here, anyway?"

"I told you."

Steve rolls his eyes. "You're such an asshole," he returns bluntly,

because it needs to be said. He turns on his heel and starts to head up the stairs to his room. He doesn't have the time or energy for Billy Hargrove.

"Here, kid," he hears Billy say. "Put this out for me."

Steve looks over his shoulder to see Billy handing his cigarette to Will, and then he's following Steve up the stairs.

Unbelievable.

*Just ignore him*, Steve tells himself as he opens the door to his room. *Don't let him get to you.*

"Holy shit, Harrington. Did a fucking tornado touchdown in here?"

Billy is referring to - of course - the piles of dirty clothes strewn all over Steve's bedroom floor.

"Yeah, I guess laundry isn't very high on the priority list when you're recovering from a concussion," Steve says dryly.

Billy grins wickedly and leans against the doorway. "Would you unclench?" he asks. "I'm just trying to make conversation."

Steve can feel his face flushed with heat out of annoyance for the cockroach at his door, just watching him. He starts picking up the essential clothes and tosses them on the bed.

"Oh, yeah, can't forget *that*," Billy comments sarcastically when Steve also adds the hairspray from his dresser to the pile.

Steve bumps him in the chest with his shoulder as he pushes past him to retrieve his shampoo and conditioner from the bathroom, too.

"You're such a girl, Harrington," Billy says when he returns. He's moved to Steve's bookcase and is going through the albums stored there. "Phil Collins. Really? *Lionel Richie*?"

The huff of air that Steve blows out is a long time coming. Billy sure knows how to test his patience.

Billy continues to yammer on about Steve's "soft" music collection while Steve gets down on all fours to reach under the bed. What he pulls out shuts Billy up real quick.

His bat of nails.

The weapon of choice that night - used by Max - to threaten Billy's manhood.

Steve thinks he *actually* sees Hargrove gulp.

"What the fuck do you even have that for?" Billy rasps.

"You better pray that you never find out," Steve answers. He crosses the room to his desk where his keys are laying on the surface and stuffs them in his jeans pocket. He grabs the walkie-talkie Dustin gave him, too. "I think I have everything I need," he says. "I just have to grab a duffle from my parents' closet."

God, he really doesn't want to step foot in *there*.

"Let me," Billy says easily and is jogging out of the room before Steve can process that he offered. "Here, princess," Billy quips when he returns. "Look alive." He chucks the duffle into Steve's hands and cackles when it almost knocks him off balance.

"Yeah, thanks a lot," Steve huffs and starts stuffing the bag full. When he zips it closed, he wastes no time in slinging the bag over his shoulder and beelining for the door. "I'm out of here."

Hargrove flips the light off and follows him down the hallway to the stairs. As they reach the top, Steve happens to glance over at the decorative table placed between his dad's office door and the bathroom. His heart almost stops when he lays eyes on the old family photo that's framed and on display there.

He feels emotion rise up in his throat as he reaches for the frame instinctively.

"Harrington, what?" Billy says from behind him.

Steve doesn't answer. He just stares at the photo. Christmas Day,

1974. He and his parents are seated in front of their Christmas tree, arms wrapped around one another, big smiles on all their faces. Steve's mom is leaned in towards his dad, eyes looking up at him lovingly. And his dad is looking down at Steve like he hung the moon.

Steve's vision starts to blur.

"Oh, shit," Billy breathes as he realizes what Steve is looking at. "Jesus."

Steve closes his eyes. He suddenly feels very hot. Overwhelmingly hot.

Vaguely, he feels a hand grip his elbow and then the picture frame is being pulled from his grasp. The duffle bag is also slipped off his shoulder.

"I gotta sit," Steve mumbles, almost frantically, over the ringing in his ears. He feels like he would fall flat on his face if not for the tight hold Billy has on him.

"Not yet," Billy says, and his voice sounds funny - distorted and *gentle*? "C'mon, let's get you outside." He nudges Steve forward, and says, "But you're gonna have to open your fucking eyes, man."

Steve obeys and clumsily, he and Hargrove make it down the stairs. Steve is just trying to put one foot in front of the other.

"Byers, get the door," Billy orders when they reach the bottom.

Will nods and swings the door open. Steve welcomes the cool autumn air and lets Billy deposit him on the stoop.

"Is he okay?" he hears Will ask worriedly. "Steve?"

"He's fine," Billy grits out. To Steve, he says, "Pull yourself together, Harrington. We'll get your shit and lock up."

They return back inside the house.

And everything goes quiet.

## 14. Chapter 14

Will stands by the door. "Shouldn't we be out there with him?" he asks hopelessly, gut twisting with empathy for Steve.

Billy Hargrove - Will has only heard horror stories about him - is sitting on the fourth stair up, brow furrowed and wringing his hands. "No," he answers firmly. "Right now he just needs some space."

Will bites down on his lip. "How do you know?" he asks timidly.

"I just do, okay? Just... just trust me on this."

That's rich, coming from the least trustworthy guy on the planet. Will doesn't really know what to make of him.

*"You should have seen him, Will. I've never seen anyone that mad."*

*"He beat Steve up real good. Scared the hell out of Lucas."*

*"He is ACTUALLY a reincarnation of the devil."*

Those were just a select few of the many quips Will's friends had spouted off about Billy. But the thing is... what Will's seen so far today... it doesn't add up.

"How do I know that I can?" Will challenges. "Trust you, I mean."

Billy drops his hands, looking bored at the question. "Fuck, kid, how do you know that you can trust anybody?"

"I don't know..." Will answers slowly. He's sure Billy meant it as a hypothetical, but it was a good question. He'd never thought about it before. "If they don't ever let you down, I guess."

Billy snorts softly. "Everyone in this damn world'll let you down."

That's a pretty bitter worldview in Will's opinion, but he can tell from Billy's tone of voice that he believes it to his very core. He wonders vaguely what could've happened in Hargrove's life to make him think that.

Will trusts plenty of people. Jonathan, his mom, Hopper, Mike, Dustin, Lucas...

He dares to take a seat beside Billy on the stairs, and follows his gaze to the potted plants in the right corner of the foyer by the door. They were the ones from the stoop.

"You bring those in?" Billy asks.

Will nods. He figured Steve wouldn't want to deal with them.

*"I will never understand why people bring you plants and flowers when you're grieving," Jonathan said after one of their mom's coworkers brought an orchid over to them after she'd heard of Bob's passing. "Like, someone dies, and all of a sudden you're supposed to have a green thumb? It's just extra work. Mom doesn't need that right now."*

The pair sits in silence for a little while longer, until Will speaks what has been on his mind since the second they got into Hargrove's Camaro.

"Are you really as bad as everyone says?"

Billy raises his eyebrows. "You saw me beat Harrington's head in, didn't you?" he says, like that suffices for an answer.

"No I... I wasn't there," Will admits softly.

"You weren't?" Billy asks, now curious. "Where were you? And why was your house so fucked up? All those creepy drawings on the walls?"

Will feels his hands go clammy and wipes them on his jeans. He should've known this is where the conversation would go. "I can't tell you that."

"Why the hell not?" Billy presses. "I want to know why Maxine is scared of her own shadow everywhere she goes and why she screams her fucking head off at night."

"Max has nightmares?"



"Every. Damn. Night."

Will does too, but they don't bother him so much anymore. He knows they're dreams. It was before - when he didn't know what was real - that bothered him.

"Don't try to change the subject," Billy adds.

"I can't tell you," Will says again, as confidently as he can. "It's for your own protection, okay? Now it's your turn to trust me. You don't... you don't want to know."

Billy scoffs. "That's fuckin' bullshit, kid," he mutters. "You don't want to tell me? Fine. You freakin' weirdos can keep your big secret."

He stands suddenly - with a huff - and trudges up the stairs to get Steve's bag that was left at the top.

"Incoming."

He boots it down the stairs and Will catches it easily. Will sees him tuck a picture frame under his arm before coming back down the stairs.

"Alright, let's go," Billy says, when he gets to the bottom. "And put this in there while I lock up." He shoves the picture frame against Will's chest and swings open the door.

Will takes it from him, but hesitates because he's pretty sure that picture is what caused Steve to turn white as a sheet just moments before.

"Do it," Billy hisses at him. "He's gonna want it."

He leaves the *trust me* unsaid this time, but it's still there.

And for whatever reason, Will does.

He slips the frame in the bag.

xxx

Steve is still sitting on the stoop when Billy and Will turn to face him after locking the front door. He's resting his elbows on his knees with his head hanging limply between his hands.

Will watches as Billy drops down on the stoop next to him.

Timidly, Will does the same on the other side.

Hargrove doesn't say anything, but he does reach into his jacket pocket to pull out his pack of cigarettes. He opens the pack to reveal that there is only one left; he offers it to Steve.

Steve breathes out deeply and wipes his remaining tears on his sleeve before accepting. He lets Billy give him a light.

He doesn't smoke the whole cigarette, but he smokes it down enough to get the shake out of his hands. When he's through, he puts it out with the toe of his shoe.

Will rests a hand on his knee, asks the question he knows Billy wants to ask, but won't. "You okay?"

Steve runs his hands through his hair and nods. "Yeah," he answers with a croak. "Moment of weakness." He swallows audibly. "Sorry," he adds. "I'm good."

"Well then get up, princess," Billy says, like he's annoyed. "I don't want to hang around here all day." He stands up and then helps pull Steve up as well.

"You didn't *have* to hang around at all," Steve reminds him bitterly once he's upright. "But... thanks."

Billy rolls his eyes. "Shut up, Harrington," he growls. "Here." He tosses the house key at Steve and then starts to head for his Camaro; he's clearly not bothered by goodbyes.

Steve bites down on his lip as he watches Billy unlock his car door. Just as he's about to settle inside, Steve says, "Hargrove. Wait."

There's a beat of silence as Billy stops expectantly.

Will sees Steve shift his weight nervously. He lifts a hand to scratch that back of his head. "How did... How did your mom die?"

Now it's Billy's turn for the color to drain from his face. "...I never said that she did."

"But the pendant..." Steve takes a step closer; he *knows*. "Hargrove."

"Don't," Billy says, almost panicked, stopping Steve in his tracks. His voice is tight with emotion - but threatening still - when he says again, "Don't, Steve."

Will sees Steve take pause at not only Billy's plea, but at the fact that he called him *Steve*.

"Okay," Steve placates, raising both of his hands in surrender. "I'm sorry - I'll drop it. You can... you can go."

Billy looks away, nods once, and then ducks inside his car.

He speeds away without looking back.

## 15. Chapter 15

"Steve?"

Will's voice interrupts the... nothing that Steve was thinking about.

"Hmm?"

"Where are we going?"

Steve snaps his attention back on the road as the "Leaving Hawkins" sign passes by. After Billy had gone, Will and Steve had climbed into the car. Steve started his BMW up and he just... drove. He didn't have a plan.

All he knew was, he had to get the hell out of dodge.

Just for a little while.

"You said you wanted to get out of the house," Steve plays it off coolly. "Well, I'm doing you one better and getting you out of town." He glances at Will. "Is that okay?"

Will hesitates. "Well... when are we going back?"

"After we get something to eat. It's way past lunchtime, kid, and all you've eaten today is a bowl of cereal."

"So, you're not kidnapping me and running away?"

Steve swallows. Doesn't that sound nice? But he says, "Nah. Just momentarily."

Will nods, a soft smile creeping onto his face. "Okay. I can live with momentarily."

xxx

Steve finds them a diner and he eats more than he should.

He feels empty, and tries desperately to fill the gaping hole with a

burger, fries, and a large chocolate milkshake.

xxx

Steve doesn't remember the drive back, which is scary as hell. He remembers leaving the diner and then... he was parked in the Byers' driveway.

Will doesn't seem bothered by it. "Hey, look who it is," he says, as he kicks open the passenger door.

Steve glances into his rearview mirror to see that Jonathan has pulled in behind them. Nancy and Mike are with him, and Steve feels like he can't breathe.

He leans forward to rest his head on the steering wheel, listens to the muffled voices as Will greets his brother and company.

He hears Will murmur the words *Billy Hargrove* and then Mike shouts *WHAT?!* just as Nancy says *What in the world was he thinking?*

Steve should have known he'd get flack for this.

Jonathan says something - Steve isn't sure what - to get them all to calm down. Hears him say, *Go inside.*

Steve keeps his head down. Even as Jonathan rounds the car and opens the passenger-side door. He hates feeling exposed like this.

And it's *non-stop.*

"Hey," Jonathan says softly as he slides into the seat.

Steve greets him back, but it doesn't feel like *him*. He feels like he's not even *here*. He says, "Something's wrong," and it's his voice, but he doesn't remember forming the words.

"What is?" Jonathan asks, concerned now.

"I... I think I'm freaking out," Steve manages over the cotton feeling in his mouth. His heart is pounding against his chest. He tries to explain. "I... I don't remember..."

He can't remember the drive back.

He *can't*.

*I'm going fucking crazy.*

Jesus, he could've wrecked the car. Will could've been *hurt*.

He must've said all of that out loud because Jonathan is holding onto his arm. He says gently, "Steve, Will's okay. He's completely safe." He says, "Steve, look at me."

Steve doesn't want to. He doesn't want to look Jonathan in the eye.

Not now.

But he does.

And Jonathan is looking at him in a way that surpasses understanding, and Steve feels oddly protected by it. His stomach somersaults as he realizes this must be how *Nancy* feels when she's with Jonathan, too.

Protected.

She didn't feel that way with Steve.

Jonathan *listens* and *acknowledges* and *cares*.

He doesn't just brush everything off and *pretend*.

"Get out of your head, Steve," Jonathan says, still as gentle as ever. "Talk to me."

Steve takes in a deep breath and lets it out slowly, but the words slip out of him before he can consider their weight. "I get why you two work," he croaks. He's so tired that he can barely make his voice work properly.

Confusion flashes across Jonathan's face.

"You and Nancy," Steve clarifies.

Jonathan bites down on his lip. "Steve, let's not..." he trails off.

"What? Let's not talk about it?" Steve challenges, and there's anger bubbling up in his chest that he didn't know was there, and it's not *justified*. He knows it's not. But he can't *stop*. "You *said* 'talk to me.'"

Jonathan's wearing a forlorn expression. "I meant about—"

Steve turns his head away from Jonathan's kicked-puppy look, and gazes out the window. He makes a conscious effort to soften his voice because Byers doesn't deserve a temper tantrum. "I know what you meant," he breathes, the fight leaving him as quickly as it came. "Sorry."

Jonathan says, "No, it's okay. We haven't..."

*We haven't talked about it. Maybe we should.*

He doesn't finish the thought though. He just falls silent.

They both know now isn't the time.

Steve lets himself breathe. Tries to come back down to Earth.

Eventually, Jonathan says, "Steve?" and it's timid now, and Steve hates that he built back up the tension between them that had faded over the past couple of days.

He turns his head to look at Jonathan. "You want to know about today, don't you?"

Jonathan shrugs. "If you want to tell me about it."

Steve picks at a fray on his jeans.

"You don't have to," Jonathan says to Steve's silence. "It's just... being back at your house... that must've been really hard."

Steve nods. "It was."

*Don't think about it. Don't think about it.*

"How did...?"

Steve wonders if Jonathan will ever finish a thought again.

"How did I wind up there with Billy Hargrove?" he guesses.

"Yeah."

Steve exhales. How *had* that happened? "I don't know. He showed up here - he wanted that necklace your mom found. The one he wears all the time? It was his mom's. I gave it back and thought he'd leave, but he just stood there. He asked me where my car was and if I wanted a ride to go get it."

"And you accepted?"

Steve hangs his head. Billy is *dangerous*. Steve knows first-hand *how* dangerous. "I shouldn't have. It was irresponsible and I put Will at risk. I'm sorry."

"Steve, I'm not worried about Will. I'm worried about *you*. Billy put you in the hospital. Not even three weeks ago."

"I know, Byers. I was there."

"I could have taken you," Jonathan says quietly. "You didn't have to go with him."

Steve looks down at his hands. He doesn't have a legitimate reason to give for agreeing to take a ride with Hargrove, so instead he says, "Jonathan, I'm fine." And it sounds dumb because his heart is still pounding in his chest and his hands still feel numb.

Jonathan calls him out on it. "That's not what you were saying five minutes ago."

"I know," Steve allows with a sigh. He pinches the bridge of his nose. "But that has less to do with Billy Hargrove and more to do with the fact that my dad killed himself and my mom is MIA." Steve lets out a shuddering breath. "Billy was actually..." he trails off.

"What?" Jonathan ventures.

Steve goes back to playing with the fray on his jeans. "I don't know."



He shrugs. "I'm glad he was there."

Jonathan doesn't say anything to that. Just runs his hands through his hair, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"You think I'm crazy."

Jonathan's lips quirk into a small smile. "Maybe a little, yeah," he concedes. "I'm just... I'm glad you're okay."

Okay is relative, but Steve appreciates the sentiment.

"Thanks."

They sit there a little while longer; Steve feels his heartbeat begin slow.

Jonathan asks if he's ready to go inside.

Steve isn't, but nods anyway.

He knew he'd have to face Nancy eventually.

Might as well get it over with now.

xxx

Jonathan takes his duffle for him.

Steve walks up the porch steps, swings open the door, and lets Nancy's hug swallow him whole.

## 16. Chapter 16

Mike watches from the couch as his sister hugs Steve.

Steve melts into her embrace, their cheeks pressed into the crevice of the other's neck.

Jonathan hovers by the doorway, Steve's duffle bag hanging limply over his shoulder.

Mike sees the moment that Jonathan thinks the hug has gone on too long. He shuffles his feet, looks down.

"Steve, God, you're shaking," Nancy says and her voice is thick with emotion as she pulls away.

"I'm okay," Steve says, kind of breathy, and he doesn't look okay at all. "My back - just uh - it really hurts."

"You should go lie down," Jonathan tells him. "I'll get you some Advil."

Nancy nods in agreement. "Yeah, Steve. You should get some rest. You've had a... a tough day, I'm sure. And I shouldn't have... I'm sorry I just showed up here. I just really wanted to see you."

Mike cringes at how contrite his sister sounds.

Steve doesn't let it last, though. "You don't have to apologize for coming to your boyfriend's house, Nance," he says genuinely. "I'm glad you're here."

Nancy blushes. "Really?" she asks.

Steve raises an arm to run a hand through his hair. "Yeah. You're... You're the only one who ever even *met* my dad and..." He blows out a shaky bit of air, swallows hard.

Jonathan puts a hand on Steve's shoulder. "Let's go to my room," he suggests softly. "You can lie down and... you two can talk."

Steve and Nancy nod in agreement and disappear down the hall.

Jonathan glances at his brother. "You guys okay? Will?"

"We're good," Will confirms.

"The other two still coming?"

"They should be," Mike says.

As if on cue, Dustin and Lucas knock on the door, having ridden their bikes over from school.

"It's open!" Jonathan calls, then gives Mike and Will a wave before disappearing down the hall.

xxx

Dustin stumbles in the door first, hat askew and huffing for breath. "Sorry it took us *forever and a day* to get here," he emphasizes, "but Billy was late and *Lucas* wouldn't leave until Max got picked up."

"She's part of the party!" Lucas defends.

"Debatable," Mike says under his breath. He still hasn't fully warmed up to the idea of the self-proclaimed *zoomer*.

"Well, we're here now," Dustin says, flopping on the couch next to Will. "How're you doing, buddy? How was your day with good ol' Steve? Where *is* Steve? Is he doing okay?"

Will raises his eyebrows with a smile. "Which one of those questions do you want me to answer first?"

"The first one," Lucas answers for Dustin, taking a seat in the armchair. "How are *you*, Will?"

"I'm doing okay," Will tells them. "I miss you guys, though."

"We still see you almost every day," Mike reminds him. The Byers' place had become somewhat of a permanent hangout after school with the sole purpose to include Will.

"I know, but it's not the same. I want to be back at school."

Mike snorts at that. Will is probably the only kid on the planet who has said that.

"Your mom won't cave, huh?" Dustin says.

"Not even an inch. She's making me wait until Monday."

Mike puts a hand on Will's knee. He wants Will back too. "It'll be here before you know it."

"Yeah, look at this way," Dustin says. "You get some quality time with Steve."

"And Billy Hargrove, apparently," Mike adds, folding his arms across his chest because he still doesn't know how *that* happened.

"What do you mean?" Dustin asks.

"Tell them, Will," Mike encourages, giving his friend a nudge with his elbow.

"Okay, um... Billy Hargrove kind of... drove us over to Steve's house to pick up his car today."

"What?!" Dustin exclaims and stands up in spite of himself.

Mike smirks, satisfied that Dustin had reacted the same way he did. "Told you," he says under his breath to Will.

Will holds up his hands to placate them. "Look, I know you guys really hate Billy..." he begins.

"Hate him?" Dustin repeats, incredulously. "It goes a smidge beyond *hate*, Will. We *told* you what he did. To Steve. To Lucas."

"He's a jerk, Will. I thought he was going to kill Steve," Mike adds quietly, shuddering slightly at the memory.

"I know," Will says sincerely. "I'm not saying that he's not a jerk. Okay? I'm not. I'm just saying... he wasn't a jerk today."

Dustin sits back down. "I don't get it. Why was he even with you guys?"

So Will breaks it down for them. He says that Billy came looking for a necklace that got lost in the fight and it ended with him offering to give them a ride to get Steve's BMW.

"And you guys just *agreed* to that?"

Wills shrugs. "Yeah. I mean... Billy acted like he didn't care what Steve decided, but... it was almost like he was trying to do something... I dunno... nice?"

Mike raises his eyebrows. "Did he apologize?"

Will shakes his head. "No. I don't think so."

"It doesn't matter," Dustin says. "What Billy did... it's unforgivable! Right Lucas?"

Lucas - who had gone quiet when Billy was mentioned - hesitates at that. "I dunno..." he says, unsurely.

"What do you mean you don't know?" Mike practically explodes. "It's because you're listening to *her* isn't it?"

Mayfield. *Freaking* Mayfield.

"You mean Max?" Will asks curiously as Lucas recoils a bit at Mike's accusation. "What does she say about Billy?"

"She doesn't say anything to *us* anymore," Mike tells him, thumbing over to Dustin. "If we bring him up, she shuts it down real quick."

Dustin nods. "Yeah, she'll just say, 'I don't want to talk about Billy.'"

"But what has she told *you*, Lucas?" Mike challenges.

Lucas drops his head and runs his hands over his face. "Look, she just told me there's a reason, alright?" he says wearily. "There's a reason that he can be a jerk sometimes."

Dustin raises his eyebrows. "And that would be...?"

Lucas sighs. "She won't say. She just says that we got what we wanted. 'We leave him alone, he leaves us alone, so just drop it.'"

"Except he's not leaving us alone!" Mike yells. "He was *here*. C'mon, Steve doesn't need that bullshit right now."

Mike can feel his face warm with rage, and he wonders when he started caring about Steve Harrington so much.

"Mike, just calm down a little, okay?" Dustin says, an unlikely source of reason, despite emotion catching in his throat. "Steve didn't *have* to go with Billy, but he did. And I don't like it either, but Hargrove isn't the one we need to be focused on." He turns to Will. "How was Steve today, Will?"

"Yeah," Lucas echoes. "Where is he?"

"He, Jonathan, and Nancy are all in Jonathan's room," Will tells them. "We just got back."

"He seemed really upset, Will," Mike says.

Will nods. "He was. I mean, he *is*. It was hard for him being back at his house. He's sad about his dad and worried about his mom. But I swear to you guys, Billy was good for him today. He helped distract him. He took care of him."

Dustin huffs a breath of disbelieving air. "That doesn't change anything," he says. "Billy is the scum of the earth. Whatever he was doing today, it wasn't out of the kindness of his heart."

Mike agrees with that. "Yeah. There must've been some ulterior motive."

"Maybe he's just sorry," Will suggests timidly. "Maybe he was trying to make it right."

"If he's sorry, he should just say so."

Lucas snorts. "Can you seriously picture Billy Hargrove *apologizing*?"

"No. I can't," Mike says stubbornly. "And that's the exact reason why we shouldn't forgive him."

"Yeah, but maybe—"

Whatever Will was going to say is cut off by a knock at the door, and then Chief Hopper is stepping across the threshold, along with a man that Mike doesn't recognize. The man is wearing a sport coat; he looks to be in his forties with dark auburn hair and wide-rimmed glasses. Jim is in his officer get-up and, wearing a forlorn expression on his face.

"Kids," he greets. "I thought you all would be here. Where's Harrington?"

"Jonathan's room," Will tells him, eyeing the other man suspiciously. "What's going on?"

"This is Mr. Thompson," Jim introduces the man.

"How do you do?" the man says, tight-lipped with a nod.

"He is one of Mr. Harrington's associates at his firm," Hopper further explains. "We have something we need to discuss with Steve."

"What?" Dustin asks.

"I'll fill you in later," Jim assures them. "We should really speak with Steve first. In the meantime..." He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out an envelope. "Here," he says, holding it out to Mike.

Mike's heart leaps.

A letter from El. It's the way they had been communicating the past few weeks.

Strange man forgotten, Mike jumps up to retrieve the envelope from Hopper.

He tears it open and his friends gather around.

Hopper squeezes his shoulder, and he and Mr. Thompson disappear

down the hall.



## 17. Chapter 17

Steve's lower back is positively throbbing.

He welcomes the Advil that Jonathan brings - despite his rolling stomach - while Nancy fluffs the pillows beneath his head.

Steve recognizes that this is *weird*.

It's weird for an ex-girlfriend and her current boyfriend to be playing nursemaid to the ex-boyfriend. He knows it is.

But here they are.

"Is that better, Steve?" Nancy asks. "Now that you're lying down?"

Only a million times better. "Yeah, thanks."

Jonathan sinks into the bed next to him while Nancy sits down delicately on the edge. She reaches for his hand, squeezes it gently. "How are you doing with all of this, Steve?"

Steve raises his free hand up to his face and presses down on his eyelids. "I don't know how to answer that," he says.

"Bad question," she admits.

"No, it's not that," Steve assures her and drops his hand. "It's just... I'm feeling so much all at once that I haven't really been able to make sense out of it."

"Do you want to try to talk about it?" Nancy ventures. "Maybe putting it into words will help."

Steve swallows, not sure if he has it in him. "I don't know..."

"I think you should try, Steve," Jonathan encourages, resting a hand on Steve's knee. "If it gets to be too much, you can stop."

"Yeah," Nancy agrees. "We're just... here to listen, okay?"

Steve closes his eyes. Decides to let himself be vulnerable, because if not with them, *who*? He doesn't have anyone else.

Not really.

He lets out a deep breath and reopens his eyes. "Okay," he whispers, and gives Nancy a watery half-smile. "I'm... um... I'm really sad. And I... I don't know. I feel like I don't deserve to be."

"Steve, c'mon," Jonathan says. "What do you mean?"

"We weren't even close. Everything I did was wrong and he let me know it, you know? So I gave up. He was impossible. I just stopped caring about making him proud. I stopped caring about him altogether." Shit. His face is leaking again. He sits up a little and wipes his eyes on his sleeve. "But I should've cared. I didn't know that he would... I should have realized something was wrong. I shouldn't have left."

"He was hurting you, Steve," Nancy whispers, and there are tears dripping down her face, too.

"That's how I should have known." Steve tries to make her understand. "He had n-never laid a hand on me before."

"Steve, think about what you're saying. You didn't know he was going to take his life." Jonathan tries to reason with him. He sits up too, to look Steve directly in the eyes. "You needed to get somewhere safe. I'm not going to let you blame yourself for this, you hear me?"

Steve hears Jonathan - he *does* - but there's still a part of him that believes if he had stayed, managed to deescalate the situation *somehow*, his dad would still be alive. "I hear you," Steve whispers. He dips his head. "God. I hated him so much. But I never... I never wanted him to *die*."

"We know, Steve," Nancy says and reaches for him. "Come here."

And Steve allows himself to be maneuvered back into her arms, lets himself fall into her embrace, sore lower back be damned.

He's shaking again. And crying *hard*. And Nancy kisses his temple and

holds him together and Steve feels sick from it all because Jonathan is *right there* and her hair smells good and he wants to kiss her back.

She is safe and warm and familiar and he doesn't want to let go.

She runs her hands through his hair, shushes him, and rocks him back and forth like it is the most natural thing in the world to do.

Then it goes sideways.

He realizes what they're *doing*. And as much as Steve doesn't want to, he pulls away. The revelation hits him like a ton of bricks: he can't let himself get close to her like this. *Touching*. It feels too good and hurts too much all at the same time. "Nancy, I can't," he says, panicked.

His chest aches, because the last thing he wants to do is hurt her, and that's what he's doing. He can see it on her face.

"I'm sorry," he says, but even as he says it, he scoots away, further distancing himself from her. "I just need..." He can't explain it. "Can you just...?" he glances at the door.

He needs to settle down and he doesn't think that's going to happen with Nancy in the room.

"You w-want me to leave?" she stutters out, a wounded look on her face. There are still tears on her cheeks.

Steve looks away. "I just need a minute," he breathes, bringing his hands to his head and squeezing his eyes closed. "Please. I need a minute."

He's too hot and he feels *so* sick and he just needs a *fucking minute*.

And thank God for Jonathan Byers because he intervenes. "It's okay, Nance. Just step out for a bit. Maybe go get Steve some more water?"

Steve can't bring himself to open his eyes, but feels Nancy get up from the bed, hears the bedroom door open and close. Hears her squeak, "*I'm sorry.*"

"Steve, you okay?" Jonathan asks, and he's crouching in front of him

now. Not touching, but Steve feels his presence in front of him.

"It's too much," Steve gasps as his breaths shudder harshly in his chest. There's acid in his throat. "I feel really sick, Byers."

"I know," Jonathan says.

"That was r-really bad. With Nancy. That was bad."

"It's okay." Jonathan is so fucking *calm*. "Steve, can you open your eyes?"

"N-No," Steve grits out, because the nausea is overwhelming now. He's boiling. He stifles back a gag. "I think I'm g-going to..."

"I know. I have the bin here in front of you, man. I'm going to help you lean over it, okay?"

"Okay," Steve manages. He feels the bed dip as Jonathan sits beside him, feels the bin placed in his lap. Jonathan holds him at the elbow and tugs him forward and Steve is pretty sure it's the only amount of touching he can handle right now.

*How is Byers so damn perceptive?* he wonders as grips the rim of the bin with his free hand and tries to swallow against nausea rising up his throat.

He chokes instead, causing him to cough harshly as he throws up a slurry of stomach contents in an unrelenting bout of heaves.

Jonathan doesn't flinch. Doesn't leave his side.

"Get it all up," he encourages gently. "You'll feel better after you do."

By the time Steve is empty, his ears are ringing. He stays hovering over the bin while he spits the remaining strings of bile into the bottom.

"That's it. You're okay."

Steve is drained. Mentally and physically. But he does feel a fraction better, now that the nausea has subsided considerably. "Blood?" he

whispers, because he still can't muster up the strength to open his eyes and see for himself.

"No blood," Jonathan reports and takes the bin away. He returns with a box of tissues and wipes Steve's tears and snot from his face.

Steve is humiliated - he must look like a total train wreck - but can feel Jonathan's worry coming off him in waves. He tries to lighten the mood. "Hey Byers, scale one to ten... how sexy am I right now?"

Jonathan lets out a startled laugh. "Off the charts, man. Do you want to change your shirt?"

Steve squints his eyes open. "Yeah, but I can do it. You should go check on Nancy."

"You must be out of your mind if you think I'd leave you alone right now," Jonathan tells him bluntly, tossing a fresh T-shirt in his lap. "And Nancy'll be fine. I'm sorry I brought her here, man. I didn't know..."

*I didn't know you'd be such a mess that you couldn't handle it.*

"And we shouldn't have pushed you to talk," Jonathan adds. "I'm sorry."

Steve shakes his head, starts to tell him *don't be*, when there's a knock on the door and Chief Hopper nudges the door open slightly. "Everything okay in here?" He's holding a glass of water in his hand.

"Getting there," Jonathan answers for Steve. "He was sick again."

"Doing better now," Steve insists, feeling his face flush red. "Hi, Chief. What're you doing here?"

Jim clears his throat. "Just checking in and..." he sticks his head out the door into the hallway. "Give us just a second, Jerry, okay?" He then steps into the room all the way and closes the door behind him. "You alright, kid?"

Steve frowns, ignoring the question. He's more focused on *Jerry* in the hallway. There isn't anybody he can think of off the top of his head

with the name Jerry. "Who're you talking to? Who's here?"

"Don't worry about that for a minute," Hopper says, stern and concerned. "Are. You. Okay?"

Steve has learned quickly that Jim is stubborn and won't cave until Steve gives him a fair assessment of his current state of being. He swallows and tries to get a grip. "Been better. Been worse. That water for me?"

There's a stale aftertaste of bile on his breath and it's making him feel sick all over again.

"Courtesy of Nancy," Jim confirms as he hands it over, looking at Steve critically. "You don't need another trip to the hospital, do you?" he asks, and palms a big, calloused hand against Steve's forehead.

"No, I don't think so," Steve tells him honestly. He thinks he's just *sad*. And *scared*. He takes a careful sip of the water to rid his mouth of the awful taste, then sets it on the nightstand.

Jim hums as he draws his hand away. "Any blood?" He repeats the same question Steve had asked earlier.

Jonathan shakes his head. "I think he just needs some rest." He pats Steve knee. "You still need to change your shirt, man."

Steve blinks. "Oh. Yeah."

He's not sure he has the strength.

"Let me help," Hopper says, reading his mind. "I need to check you over anyway."

xxx

"So who's in the hallway?" Steve asks, after Hopper has helped him into a new shirt, kicked Jonathan out of his own bedroom to go check on Nancy, and made absolutely and totally sure that Steve didn't need to go back to the hospital.

Jim is sitting on the edge of the bed next to Steve, gliding the rim of

his sheriff's hat between his fingers. He lets out a deep breath. "His name is Jerry Thompson. He works at your dad's firm. Said he's met you a couple of times at dinner parties and banquets."

"Oh," Steve says vaguely, not able to picture him. "Why's he here?"

"He came down to the station today. He's been trying to get ahold of you, but didn't know where you were staying. He has news about your mom, kid."

Steve's stomach - what's left of it - drops into his toes.

"What?" he croaks. "What is it?"

Hopper licks his lips. "She's okay. Relatively speaking. But I should let Jerry tell you the rest. He came all this way. Let me go get him."

xxx

It's *obviously* not good news, which is what Steve was expecting.

That's all he'd been getting lately, so why should it stop now?

So when *Jerry* (and yeah, Steve is pretty sure he's never met the guy) tells him that his mother is in a hospital in France, suffering from severe knife wounds and fractured ribs, it doesn't faze him.

Not really. Not in the way it should.

"She was attacked," this stranger Jerry tells him. "Coming out of a restaurant."

"She was with someone," Jim adds. "A man. He took the brunt of it. Fought the guy off."

Steve swallows. "Who was he?"

Jerry frowns. "Someone she met at the hotel, I think. From what I understand, they had been spending quite a deal of time together since your parents arrived in Paris—"

"I'm not talking about my mom's latest fling," Steve interrupts

impatiently, because that's the same, tired story. "Why the hell was she attacked? *Who* attacked her?"

"He got away," Jerry tells him. "But the authorities are pretty sure it was an attempted mugging turned bloody. You know, tourists are always targeted over there."

He says it with a scoff, like he believes Steve's mother brought this upon *herself*.

Jim, sitting beside him, has a grounding hand at the base of Steve's neck like he thinks Steve might come apart at the seams any moment now. "Steve, the important thing is that she's going to be okay," he says. "She's stable."

Steve nods slowly, his mind on one thing only. "Does she... Does she know about m-my dad?"

"She does," Jim says. "Someone from your dad's firm who also made the trip out there is staying with her. He informed her."

"You know Neil Harding, don't you, Steve?" Jerry asks.

Steve does. Neil Harding is one of his dad's earliest associates. Probably the closet thing his father had to an actual "friend." He nods. "I should go out there," Steve realizes. "To Paris. I should be with her."

But Jim thinks otherwise. "Steve, kiddo, I think it's best you stay in Hawkins. They'll put your mom on a flight back to the States once she's fit enough to fly."

Steve's chest hurts. "I need to call her then. Can I call her?"

"It's almost midnight out there," Jerry tells him. "But I'll leave you the number."

"Yeah, why don't you do that, Jerry," Hopper agrees. "And thanks for coming out and getting the news to Steve, here."

"Yeah, thank you," Steve echoes quietly. He wants Jerry gone. He wants to scream. He wants to *die*.



Jerry recognizes that he's being dismissed and stands from Jonathan's desk chair. He nods once. "It was the least I could do," he says.

Jim gives Steve's neck a final, gentle squeeze. "I'll walk you out," he tells Jerry. "You'll be okay for a minute?" he asks Steve.

*Who the hell knows?* Steve wants to say, but nods instead. "You'll tell the others?" he asks hopefully.

"I will. Lean back. Get some rest."

xxx

Dustin enters the room without knocking, not even twenty seconds later.

Steve had just managed to lean back into the pillows. He hadn't known Dustin was coming and feels himself relax at just the sight of him. "Hey, man," he greets softly.

"Hey," Dustin replies, but he's not wearing the toothy grin he usually does. He thumbs over his shoulder. "Who was that guy?"

"Hopper was going to fill you all in," Steve answers. "You're probably missing it now."

"Oh," Dustin says and shrugs. He takes a step closer. "I'd rather hear it from you anyway. How are you doing?"

"I'm fucking exhausted," Steve croaks.

Brutally honest.

He doesn't mean it as a dismissal, but that's how Dustin takes it.

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No," Steve says, with an edge of panic in his voice that surprises him. "I'll be exhausted whether you're here or not, shithead. I want you here." He pats the spot on the bed next to him to prove it.

That gets him the beginnings of a smile as Dustin settles onto the bed

beside him. "Good, because I wasn't gonna leave."

Steve rubs his eyes and gives Dustin a soft smile. "Is that right?"

"Yup," Dustin says proudly. And then, still curious about the mystery man: "So...?"

Steve drops his hands. "So... they found my mom..." he starts, and proceeds to elaborate in the simplest terms because he doesn't have the energy or the emotional capacity left to delve into it entirely.

Dustin picks up on it and doesn't press for more. Just asks softly, "Are you okay?"

"No."

"What can I do?"

Steve lets out a shuddering breath. "Can you just... tell me about your day? I mean it, man. Like... from start to finish. Nothing left out. I really just... I need something else to focus on, and I... I want to hear about your day."

Dustin nods because he understands. Of course he understands.

"Let's see... where to begin?" He rubs his hands together, pondering. "Well, I was awakened this morning by *Tews* jumping on my *face*..."

He launches into a detailed soliloquy; commentary only.

Steve lets Dustin's words - and memories of simpler times - lull him to sleep.

## 18. Chapter 18

"Are you okay?"

Max asks the question before she can help herself.

Billy had been late picking her up, which was rare these days. And now, he's driving. The speed limit. No music blaring. No cigarette dangling between his lips.

His gas light is on. He had a quarter of a tank this morning.

He's wearing sunglasses, so Max can't get a good look at his eyes. His hands are gripping the steering wheel tight, skin pulled white at the knuckles.

He doesn't answer her.

"Billy?"

"I'm fine," he growls. But he's Not Okay. Max can feel it and something bubbles up in her gut that she has never felt for Billy before.

Worry.

Dread.

Still, she drops it until they get home.

xxx

When Billy gets inside, he goes straight for the kitchen sink. Fills a cup up with water and just stands there, staring out the back window.

Max had followed him. "What's going on?" she tries again. She drops her book bag to the floor by the kitchen table. "Billy?"

"Nothing, Max. I told you I'm fine." His voice is pinched.

"Then turn around and look at me."

Billy sniffs. "You are such a pain in the ass," he says hoarsely, and doesn't turn around.

"You're crying." She knows he is.

Billy lifts his cup to his mouth with a shaky hand. Takes a drink and doesn't deny it. "That's great, Max. Thanks for noticing. You can stop pretending to care now."

Max's heart thunders in her chest at how despondent he sounds. "Billy, I'm not pretending. You're scaring me." She knows how strongly Billy can feel, primarily anger. But this isn't anger. She's pretty sure this is *despair*.

Billy flinches at her words. *You're scaring me*. "Yeah, because I'm no better than Neil, right?" he says, so quietly that Max isn't sure she was meant to hear it. He turns around to face her then, eyes overflowing with tears, his breaths coming in shudders.

He's *shaking*.

"No... Billy..." Max closes her eyes. It had been a mistake saying that. She takes the cup of water from him and leads him to sit down at the kitchen table. "Just sit down a minute and breathe, okay?"

He nods and covers his face with his hands. He's trembling all over.

Max bites down on her lip. She doesn't know what to do with *this* Billy.

She glances at the clock. It's a little after 4:00. Their parents don't usually get home until after 5:00. Which means... she's on her own. She doesn't think Billy would want their parents to see him like this anyway. She doesn't think he wants *her* to.

She sits down in the chair across from him. "Where did you go today?"

"Who says I went anywhere?" Billy challenges her flatly, not dropping his hands.

"There's gas missing from the tank, Billy. I'm not stupid."

"It's none of your business," he counters.

"Then don't have a fucking meltdown in the middle of the kitchen."

"I'm not having a *meltdown*."

"What do you call it then?"

Billy lowers his hands to look at her. "I don't know," he breathes. "I don't know."

xxx

He locks himself in his room after that and Max has to cover for him with Neil.

"I think he's sick," she answers when he asks *where the hell is my son?* after Susan had called for dinner.

Neil doesn't buy it.

He knocks Billy's door down. Pulls him out of bed by the collar and drags him into the kitchen. Slaps him hard *twice* before shoving him into a chair.

*You don't skip meals that Susan has slaved over, you disrespectful piece of shit. You're going to eat this meal that Susan prepared. All of it. And I better hear you apologize to her for being late.*

Billy keeps his head down. Mumbles, "Sorry, Susan."

They eat their meal in silence.

It tastes like ash to Max.

xxx

Billy pukes it all back up in the middle of the night.

Max is there. With him. She hadn't been sleeping anyway.

He tells her to leave.

She doesn't.

xxx

Billy still drives her to school the next morning. The cigarette is back. The blaring radio is back.

Max reaches to flip it off.

"Watch it, Maxine," he warns.

She flips it off anyway.

"Are you seriously going to go to school today?" she asks to the silence. "You could barely keep your head up last night."

"Don't need your concern, Red."

"Billy."

Out of nowhere, Billy whips the car to the side of the road and throws it in park. "You don't get to do this," he says through gritted teeth and puts his cigarette out in the ashtray. His face is becoming flushed, causing a different kind of contrast to highlight the fresh bruise on his cheek.

Max's heart is being fast from the rush. "D-Do what?" she stutters out.

He shakes his head. "Just because you *know* now," he swallows hard. "It shouldn't change that you fucking hate my guts. I'm still the same jerkwad, Max. Neil was beating me long before you and Susan ever showed up. So I'm *still the same*. Nothing has changed. Nothing *is* going to change."

"I don't hate your guts," Max says, shrinking into herself.

Tears are welling up in the corner of his eyes. "That's my point. You used to. Let's just go back to that before I let you down again, huh?"

He turns the radio back on.

Max flips it off again because she has something she needs to say about this. Billy has been more on her mind these days than the Upside Down.

"I *do* think you're an asshole," she says. "Grade A. But I also think you're scared. You're scared of getting close to anybody because the only person you were ever close to left you. I think your default is anger and yesterday was a rare time I saw through the cracks. I think you're like Neil in ways you can't control, but I think you can be better than him."

She thinks about the short exchange she and Lucas had last night over the walkies. *Will says Billy took Steve back to his house to get his car. He said he was good for Steve. Helped him through it.*

"I *know* you can be better than him," she amends.

She lets out a deep breath.

"And I don't hate your guts."

Billy stares straight out the windshield. Doesn't say anything. He licks his lips, punches the radio to turn it on, and tears out into the open road.

## 19. Chapter 19

"You did so good, sweetie," Joyce tells him once he hangs up the phone. "Come on. Come sit down." She pulls him over to the couch and wraps a blanket around his shoulders.

He feels numb all over.

His mom had been... quiet. Steve gets that she's probably grief-stricken and in a lot of pain from her injuries, but it was almost like Steve was inconveniencing her by calling.

His mom had always been kind of distant, always busy with something else to pay any attention to him.

Steve just thought that *this* would be different.

It was strictly business over the phone with her. Very shortly came the "I'm fine," when Steve asked how she was recovering.

When Steve said, "I wish I could be there with you," he was expecting, *I wish you could be, too*, but got a "yeah" instead.

When Steve started crying and said, "I'm so sorry about Dad," she said nothing for a long while. And then, "Neil gave Mr. Thompson instructions for the arrangements. Your father is to be cremated. We'll have a service when I get home."

That had been it.

She hadn't asked how *he* was doing with all of this.

And it stings that Joyce Byers, who has her arm wrapped around his shoulders and is rubbing his right arm up and down, is more in tune to how he is feeling than his own mother.

"Thanks, Mrs. Byers," Steve tells her and tries to sober his voice that is thick with emotion. "I mean... Joyce." He gives her a half-hearted smile and wipes his eyes on his sleeve. "D-Don't you need to get to work?"



Jonathan had already left for school. Will is still asleep.

Joyce brushes the hair out of his eyes and sighs. "Yes," she admits as she stands. "I do."

"And you're sure it's okay for me to take Will with the guys to the movies later?"

"Yes. It should be fine. Just... watch out for him."

Steve nods. "Of course."

"And no more escapades with Billy Hargrove," she adds warningly.

Steve looks down at his hands with a soft smile on his lips. "Yes, ma'am."

xxx

Steve wakes with a start, drool slipping down his chin. He must've fallen asleep on the couch after Joyce left. He wipes his eyes and glances at his watch. It's a little after ten o'clock.

He makes his way into the kitchen, where Will is seated at the table, an array of crayons in front of him. But he's not drawing. He's just staring at them.

"Hey kid. You're up."

"Yeah, hey," Will answers, but doesn't lift his head.

"You okay?" Steve asks carefully.

"Will nods, but then shrugs. He looks up at Steve then. "Bob got me these crayons."

Steve's throat works. "Oh."

"Yeah."

"You should draw him," Steve suggests. "Bob. It'd be a good way to honor his memory."

Will bites down on his lip, thinking. "Yeah!" he says excitedly, an idea brewing. "I know what to do."

He gets to work.

"Did you eat, kid?"

"Mmhhh. Cereal." Will shakes the box of Frosted Flakes that are still in front of him with his free hand.

Steve gets a bowl from the cabinet to help himself to some as well. "Do you like, live off of this stuff?"

"Pretty much."

Steve grabs the milk from the fridge, sits down across from Will, prepares a bowl, and takes a bite.

"Can't say I blame you."

xxx

When Will finishes his drawing (Bob Newby, Superhero, complete with a cape), he spends the rest of the day teaching Steve how to play *Space Invaders* on the Atari. Steve had only played once before, at Tommy's place.

It's more fun with Will.

And it swallows up the rest of their day.

xxx

"What's up?" Steve asks through the passenger side window to Mike, who approaches the car when they pull up next to the school. Dustin and Lucas are sitting on the curb, huddled around a flustered-looking Max.

"Max is being a drama queen," Mike sighs. "Because Billy's late. He must've ditched school again. You guys are late, too," he adds pointedly.

It's true... they are over 20 minutes late.

"Sorry, we lost track of time," Will tells him innocently.

"Yeah, Will was kicking my ass in *Space Invaders*."

Mike snorts softly and folds his arms. "Doesn't matter," he says dully. "The guys want to wait with *her* so we won't make it to the *The Terminator* anyway."

"Well, what's going on?" Steve asks. "What has her so upset?"

"Who knows?" Mike mumbles, scowling in her direction.

Steve kills the engine and kicks open his door. Will does the same.

xxx

Max tries to play it off like she's annoyed Billy is late, but Steve is pretty sure she's actually *worried*.

"He *knows* if i'm late getting home I'll be grounded for another week," she complains.

"Then you should've started walking twenty minutes ago," Mike quips under his breath, and gets a swift kick in the shin from Steve.

"It's no sweat, Max. I'll drive you home. We're just gonna have to cram."

She bites down on her lip, unsure.

"If he shows and you're not here, the first place he'll check is back home," Steve reasons. "C'mon." He holds a hand out and pulls her up and they all pile back into the car.

xxx

"Well, we missed the movie," Mike says, once Max disappears into the house, no trace of Billy's car anywhere.

"Would you shut up about the movie?" Lucas groans. "It's not the end of the world."

"Yeah, kid, we'll catch it on another day," Steve says. "Besides, I'll make it up to you. How does the arcade sound? Or sundaes at the diner? On me."

Steve doesn't want to just go back to the Byers' house. He wants a *distraction*.

"How about *both*?" Dustin says with a toothy grin from the backseat.

"Sure," Steve says easily. "Will?"

"Okay!"

"Lucas?"

"You know I'm game."

"Mike?"

Wheeler doesn't answer and Steve catches him with his arms folded in the rearview mirror. Both Lucas and Dustin start jabbing him in the ribs. "Miiikkkeeee."

He gives his signature eye roll but can't help his lips quirking into a smile.

"Fine," he relents with a sigh.

xxx

Steve doesn't make it inside the arcade, though.

He drops the kids off, making some bullshit excuse about needing to pick up a new prescription (and given his two recent hospital visits, the kids buy it). He tosses them some coins and tells him he'll join them in a few. "We'll get sundaes after."

"Okay. Thanks, Steve!"

Steve watches them disappear into the arcade then crosses the street to the local pub.

Hargrove's Camaro is parked outside.

xxx

He's sitting alone at a corner booth, head resting against the wall, eyes closed. He has an empty pint in front of him.

Steve wastes no time sitting heavily into the booth across from Hargrove, effectively waking him.

"What the hell are you doing?" Steve asks him bluntly as Billy blinks to look at him.

"Harrington?" he croaks.

"The one and only," Steve replies dully. He repeats, "What the hell are you doing?"

"What, are you my keeper now?" Billy snarls, rubbing his forehead with his thumb and forefinger.

"No, but I'm apparently Max's," he throws back. "Just dropped her off at home."

Billy's head snaps up then. "What?" He looks panicked. "What time is it?"

"It's going on 5 o'clock, man—"

Steve can't even finish his sentence. Billy throws some bills down on the table and then he's making a beeline for the door, his movements uncoordinated and sloppy.

Steve follows him because he recognizes that there is no way Billy should be behind the wheel of a car right now. Once outside, Steve grabs his arm and is immediately knocked down - *hard* - on his ass.

It *hurts*. It knocks the air out of him as the pain in his lower back is exacerbated with the contact of his tailbone hitting concrete. There's no stopping Billy now. Steve feels paralyzed.

He watches hopelessly as Billy gets in and slams the door shut.

Only, Billy doesn't make a getaway. The car sputters but doesn't start.

Steve hears Billy yell a series of curses, hears him bang against the steering wheel, hears the glass to the driver-side window *shatter*.

And then it's just... quiet.

Steve scrambles to his feet on adrenaline only, because he's pretty sure there's only one way that glass could have shattered. The pain in his back is forgotten in the moment.

Billy had fucking *punched* out the window and he is bleeding fucking *everywhere*, Steve realizes as he rushes to open the door. It's unlocked - thank *God* - and Billy is just sitting there numbly, looking down at his left arm with wide eyes.

"Hargrove - Jesus - what the hell did you *do*?" Steve stutters out. "Holy *shit*."

Billy doesn't answer - Steve figures he must be in shock. Without even thinking about it, he shrugs off his windbreaker and wraps it around Billy's injured arm.

There's so much blood.

"Keep pressure on that," he says firmly, eyeing the dashboard. "And get out. Your car's out of fucking gas and you need a hospital. What the *hell*, Hargrove?"

Billy allows Steve to pull him out of the car. "No 'ospital," he slurs on wobbly legs. "M'okay. This's nothing."

"It's not nothing, asshole. Move your feet."

Hargrove is heavy, and barely conscious, and Steve's back *hurts* as he practically drags him to his BMW.

"Steve. No hospital," Billy says again once Steve has him in the passenger seat. "Please." He can barely keep his eyes open, but his voice is pleading. Emphatic.

Steve snaps his fingers in his face. "Stay awake, shithead." He shuts Billy's door and rounds the car.

"You can't..." Billy tries as Steve starts the engine. "M'dad'll kill me."

Something in Steve's gut twists because Billy isn't saying it like a hypothetical. Slurred or not, Steve hears the certainty behind it.

He decides to take it at face-value.

"Okay," he relents as he peels out of the parking lot. "No hospital. But if you pass out on me, Hargrove..."

"I won't," Billy growls back, leaving the *I've had worse* in the air between them.

xxx

Steve takes him back to the Byers' place.

It's empty. Both Jonathan and Joyce are at work.

Steve deposits Hargrove in a kitchen chair and hunts down the first aid kit; it's still in Jonathan's room from the night his dad died.

Steve holds his breath. He doesn't want to think about that right now. Or ever.

He returns to Billy.

xxx

"Why are you doing this?" Billy asks suddenly, as Steve finishes wrapping his wrist.

Hargrove's injuries ended up not being as bad as they first appeared. Yes, there had been a lot of blood, but the cuts on his knuckles and wrist aren't deep enough to warrant stitches.

Billy has sobered some now. His curly hair is matted down with sweat, face still pale from the blood loss. There's a colored bruise on left cheek that Steve is 99% sure wasn't there yesterday.

"Because I'm not an asshole," Steve answers. It's really as simple as that. He starts putting the supplies back in the kit.

"You're going through enough shit on your own," Billy says, like Steve doesn't get it. He's not crying, but it's close and it makes the pit in Steve's stomach grow. "So why the hell are you bothering with me?"

"Hargrove, look around," Steve says. "Who else is gonna?"

Billy's face darkens at that and, immediately, Steve wishes he hadn't said it.

He backpedals. "Look, that's... not what I meant. I just... yeah. You're right. I'm going through a lot of shit right now. And you don't even know the half of it." Billy's head snaps up to look at him then, curious. He doesn't know about the Upside Down or Demodogs or the Shadow Monster; Steve almost thinks it's funny that all that has taken a back-burner to everything else. He clears his throat, looks Billy in the eyes. "But I think... I think you're going through some shit too."

Billy doesn't say anything to that. He just leans forward and rests his elbows on the table, head in his hands.

Steve glances at the clock and decides to put a pause on the conversation. There's so much that still needs to be said, but it's getting late and he needs to get ahold of someone to go pick up the kids. He stands to fill a glass of water and sets it in front of Hargrove. "Drink that," he says. "I need to make a phone call."

He leaves Billy sitting at the kitchen table and heads for the phone.

He prays that Nancy is home.



## 20. Chapter 20

El sits across from Jim, happy that they're able to share a meal together. It has been a while.

He smiles as he watches her finish her salisbury steak TV dinner.

"You look good," he says. "Appetite is back."

"I'm close," she tells him.

"To 100%?" he clarifies.

She nods.

She's not sleeping as much anymore, and her head doesn't pound every time she changes equilibrium. She's *close*.

"I'm sorry I haven't been here," Jim tells her, always forthright. "I wish I could spend every moment with you, kid."

"Steve," El says simply. She understands. "He's needed you."

"Yes he has," Jim agrees.

"He's tough," El says. "He protects."

"We all protect each other, kid. That's how it goes."

"Family."

"Yeah. Family." Jim takes El's finished container and throws it in the trash. "You still hungry for some dessert Eggos?"

"Always."

xxx

"When you're finished with that, I have a letter for you."

El stops mid-bite. She had been *savoring* the last Eggo topped with whipped cream, chocolate sauce, and sprinkles, but now... "From

Mike?"

Jim grins. "And the others."

El finishes the rest of her waffle in one over-sized bite. "Okay, done," she says eagerly and holds her hand out expectantly.

Jim fishes it out of his back pocket, grinning widely as he hands over the envelope.

El snatches it out of his hands and tears it open, taking in the handwriting and supplementary drawings from Mike, Lucas, Dustin, and Will.

"I want to read it on my own," El tells Jim. "Is that okay?" She's been feeling more confident with her reading.

Jim nods; he looks proud. "Absolutely." He stands up from the table. "I'm gonna hit the head. Back in a few."

El takes in a deep breath, and starts reading.

xxx

*Dear El,*

*I miss you. We all do. I hope you're still recovering well. Hopper says you're getting better every day. Will is getting better, too. I can't wait until you get to come to school with us. The party won't be complete until you're back.*

*I thought that everything would quiet down after you closed the gate, but there is a lot still going on. I know Hopper told you about Steve. He's staying with the Byers. We're all just trying to help him get through this.*

*That girl Max is still hanging around. Lucas is like... in love with her or something. He's so in love that he doesn't see how annoying she is. I think he wants to take her to the Snow Ball.*

*Speaking of the Snow Ball, I want to take YOU. Do you think Hopper will let you come?*

*I have to go because the others want to write something too. I miss you. I hope I get to see you soon.*

*-Mike*

xxx

*Dear El,*

*Mike is right. We miss you A LOT.*

*Don't listen to him about Max, though. She's really cool. I think you two could be friends. Just keep an open mind when you meet her again, okay? And I'm NOT in love with her.*

*Take care of yourself. Our party misses its most valuable member.*

*-Lucas*

xxx

*ELEVEN!*

*Holy crap do we miss you.*

*I hope this letter makes you smile.*

*Hopper says you and Mike have been writing back and forth so you can practice your reading and writing. That's so cool! Hopefully you can read what I'm saying. You're really smart so you probably can.*

*We're at the Byers' house right now. We came to hang out with Will and see how Steve's doing. You don't really know Steve, do you? He's SO AWESOME. I think he's really sad right now, though. I wish I could do something to cheer him up.*

*Keep in touch, okay? We love you.*

*-Dustin*

xxx

*Hi El,*

*This is Will. I know we don't know each other too well, but I think about you often. I think about how you helped save me.*

*I hope you're doing okay. I know it's hard being away from friends.*

*Mike, Lucas, and Dustin always talk about you so much that it feels like I've known you my whole life. I can't wait to meet you in person.*

*Until then,*

*Will Byers*

xxx

Underneath Will's note is a drawing of the Upside Down and the Shadow Monster looming, with El standing protectively, arm outstretched, between that and a huddled-up figure of Will. Beneath the drawing, Will had simply written *Thank You*.

xxx

El is overcome with emotion by the time she's finished reading.

She feels tears on her cheeks.

"Hey, kiddo," Jim says when he returns to sit across from her. "Are those happy or sad tears?"

She's not sure. "I think both," she says, and wipes her cheeks with the back of her hands.

"Friends have the effect, sometimes," Jim says wisely. He holds his hand out expectantly. "May I?"

El nods and hands it over. She watches Jim as he reads.

He smiles fondly at the notes. "Good kids," he says when he's finished. He sets the paper on the table, leans forward, rests his chin in his hands. "I know how hard this has been for you."

"Yeah," El says softly. "But... necessary."

Jim looks thoughtful. "Yeah," he echoes. He reaches his hand out and

places it on top of hers. "By the way, you're going to that Snow Ball."

El's heart stutters. "Wait. Really?" she says, elated.

"I'll make it happen."

El squeals with delight and jumps up to give Jim a quick peck on the cheek. "*Thank you!*" Then she wraps her arms around his shoulders to give him a hug from behind.

Jim laughs and pats at her arms around his neck. "Easy now, kid. You better start your response quick, so you have it in writing. You still have some time before *Jeopardy!*"

El glances at the clock to confirm Jim's claim. "Okay!" she agrees happily.

She rounds the table to sit back in her chair.

Jim slides a fresh pad of paper and a pen over to her.

She gets to work.

## 21. Chapter 21

Billy is nearly asleep, sagged back in the chair, limp, when Steve returns to the kitchen.

Steve pauses for a second at the doorway.

He realizes that Billy looks beat.

As in *beaten*.

His face is muddled with discolored bruises. Ones that Steve *swears* weren't there the day before.

There are dark circles under his eyes.

He looks more exhausted than Steve feels.

Steve tries not to venture *why*.

xxx

"Hey," Steve shakes Billy's shoulder. "You can't sleep here."

Billy opens his eyes, realization dawning on his features as he looks around at his surroundings. "Yeah. Fuck. Got'a get h'me."

"That's not what I meant," Steve amends. "You just can't sleep *here*. At the kitchen table. You can take the couch."

Billy stands. "No. Got'a get h'me," he repeats, and almost stumbles backwards.

Steve steadies him with a hand behind his back. "Yeah-no," he says. "That's not happening. You're staying here until you can walk in a straight line again. C'mon." He nudges him to the couch.

xxx

"Max. Come in, Max. You there?"

Steve feels ridiculous as he sits at the Byers' kitchen table with his

Realistic walkie-talkie in his hand. He's not even sure if he's on the right channel.

But then... "Steve?" Max's voice cuts in over the static.

"Yeah, it's me," Steve answers. "Listen, I found Billy."

*"You did? Aren't you guys at the movies?"*

"Didn't make it to the movies. I'm sure you'll get an earful from Mike about that."

*"Great."* Steve can practically feel the eye roll.

"Kids decided to go the arcade. I noticed Billy's Camaro parked outside the pub across the street."

Max is quiet on the other end for a while.

*"Is he okay?"*

Steve doesn't know how to answer her question, but settles with: "He punched the window out to his car. He wouldn't let me take him to the hospital, so we're at the Byers. I think his arm will be okay, but Max... I don't think *he* is."

Max curses under her breath. Then she curses again. *"Shit, Steve. My mom just got home, so I gotta go. Listen, I'll cover for Billy, alright? Can you...?"*

"Yeah. I've got him. I'll get him home by nine."

*"Thank you,"* Max says. *"Thank you for finding him."*

Then she's out.

xxx

"What are you doing?" Steve demands when he returns from the kitchen to the TV room to find Billy fumbling with the locks at the front door. He expected Billy to be passed out on the couch by now.

"Leaving."

"No you're not. Billy." Steve approaches him. He dares to take ahold of Billy's good arm to pull him a way from the door.

But Billy's not having it. He whips his arm away and turns to face Steve. "Fuck off, Harrington. I'm fine. I'm going home."

"Hargrove, look. I talked to your sister—"

"She's *not* my sister," he interrupts with a growl, like it's a reflex.

Steve takes a deep breath. "Okay. I talked to Max. She said she'd cover for you. So just... Come sit down."

"I don't want to sit down." He turns back around and continues fiddling with the locks. "I want out of this place. I-I hate this fucking house." Then without warning, he punches the doorframe with his good arm. "Why are there so many locks on this goddamn door?"

"To keep the monsters out," Steve deadpans.

Billy doesn't seem to notice. He's leaning with his forehead resting against the door, chest heaving. Steve's never seen him look so defeated.

Steve scratches his head, doesn't know what to do. "Hargrove. Hey. How about we go for a drive, yeah?"

Billy doesn't answer, but he doesn't protest either when Steve pulls him back from the door to unlock it himself.

"C'mon."

xxx

"Will you tell me what's going on with you?" Steve asks, breaking the prolonged silence. They've driven twenty miles out of town and not a single word has been uttered.

Billy remains silent.

Steve chances a glance over at him. He's leaning his head against the passenger window, eyes vacant, tears on his cheeks.



*Fuck.*

Steve pulls the car over to the side of the road and puts it in park. They're on a back country road, farmland surrounding them in all directions.

"What are you doing?" Billy croaks.

"I don't know how to help you," Steve admits, pulling the keys from the ignition and dropping his hands heavily. "I'm at a loss here, man."

"I don't need help," Billy says dully.

"That's the biggest load of bullshit I've ever heard," Steve tells him bluntly, and turns the rearview mirror toward him, so he has to face his reflection.

Billy straightens up and harshly rubs at his eyes, effectively wiping the tears from his face. "Well, why do *you* care if I need help or not?" He shoves the mirror back toward Steve. There's spite in his tone again; he's starting to sound more like himself.

"I don't fucking know," Steve tells him honestly, because he's been trying to figure that out too. "I just *do*."

Billy stares at him a little longer, not believing, not *trusting*.

"Do you always do this?" he asks.

Steve frowns. "Do what?"

"This white knight routine."

Steve closes his eyes, takes a moment to breathe before reopening them. "I know what you're doing, Hargrove, and it's not going to work. You beat the hell out of me three weeks ago, yet here I am. You still think you can push me away?"

Billy recoils. Bangs the back of his head against the headrest out of frustration. "You're fucking impossible."

Steve snorts softly. "Yeah. That makes two of us."

"I don't know what you want me to say," Billy says.

"Tell me about your mom."

"She's dead." Billy answers promptly, his words hollow. Void of emotion. But he reaches up to hold the pendant around his neck; the chain is already fixed.

Steve swallows hard. "How?"

"Hanged herself in the basement. Two weeks after my little sister died from leukemia. I found her. I was eleven."

Steve freezes. He feels sick. The heated *she's not my sister* from earlier making all too much sense now.

"Is that what you wanted to hear, Steve?" Billy asks hoarsely, but with the cusps of a sneer. "Does that sob story make up for how much of a douchebag I am? It does, doesn't it?"

Steve bites down on his lip. Thinks carefully about what to say next.

"No, that's not what I wanted to hear," he tells him softly. "And no, I don't think anything you tell me will make up for how much of a douchebag you are."

Billy lets out a startled laugh at that, then pinches the bridge of his nose with a grimace. "F-Fuck."

"...You okay?"

"Yeah. Just... headache."

"Yeah, well, blood loss post-bender will do that to you." Steve puts a hand on his knee, worried now, because Billy hasn't dropped his hand yet. "Seriously, you alright?"

"I'm fine," Billy answers, and lowers his hand, the grimace disappearing from his features.

"Okay." Steve draws back. Licks his lips. Dares to ask another question. "Hey, Hargrove," he says as gently as he can manage.

"How'd you get those bruises on your face?"

For an answer, Billy raises his eyebrows and says knowingly, "How'd you get those cuts on your arms?"

Steve feels himself nodding his understanding, eyes brimming with fresh tears, the pit in his stomach growing bigger. Confirmation for something he already knew.

"Should I take you home now?" he asks, reaching up to wipe a rogue tear from his cheek.

Billy nods. "Yeah."

So Steve does.

## 22. Chapter 22

"Guys, Steve isn't back yet," Dustin says. Lucas had noticed, too.

Mike, engrossed in Dig Dug, seems unfazed. "He's probably just caught up at the pharmacy."

"He's been gone almost an hour," Lucas says. "That's a long time."

"Should we go look for him?" Will asks.

"We'll run out of money in like, 10 minutes," Mike says, not taking his eyes off the screen. "If he's not back by then we'll going looking. Now shut up and let me concentrate."

xxx

"Okay. Now we can be worried," Mike says, when 15 minutes have passed, they're out of money, and Steve still isn't back.

"How far is the pharmacy from here?" Lucas asks.

"Four blocks, I think," Will answers. "But what if we leave to look for him and then he comes back and we're not here?"

"Maybe two of us should go and two of us should stay," Dustin suggests.

"Okay, who goes and who stays, then?" Mike asks.

While they're deciding all of this, Nancy arrives.

It's not every day that a beautiful girl graces the inside of the arcade, let alone Nancy Wheeler.

All eyes turn on her the second she steps through the door.

She pauses at the doorway. Aware of the stares, she holds her purse more tightly to her side before scanning the arcade for the boys. When she sees them, she determinedly starts walking to them; they meet her halfway.

"What are you doing here?" Mike asks Nancy.

"Steve called me. Asked me to pick you guys up."

"Why?" Dustin demands. "Is he okay?"

"He told me to assure you all that he is fine. He found Billy. Said he's in bad shape. He's taking care of him."

"What happened?" Lucas asks, a pit forming in his stomach.

"I don't know," Nancy answers with a sigh, sounding as frustrated as Lucas feels. "Steve didn't go into details."

"Does he need help?" Will asks.

"Steve says he has it handled. He says he's sorry and that he'll take you out for ice cream another time. Are you guys ready?"

"Yeah, unless you want to give us some money," Mike says hopefully.

"In your dreams, Mike," Nancy says, nudging him toward the exit. "C'mon."

xxx

"You want to come over for a bit?" Mike asks Lucas, when Nancy drops them off. She had plans to meet Jonathan back at the Byers' place since he was off work by now.

Lucas nods. "Yeah, sure. Let me just tell my parents and I'll be right over."

xxx

When Lucas steps into his house, the first thing he hears is Erica crying.

"It looks worse than it is, baby," his dad's voice assures her. "I'm okay."

"You're hurt!" Erica wails.

And Lucas's stomach drops into his toes.

"Mom? Dad?" he says cautiously as he walks down the hallway to the kitchen. "I'm home. What's goin' on?"

The scene he walks into is his mother cleaning a cut on his father's cheek, while Erica holds onto his knee, watching.

"Your father got into a fight."

"What? With *who*?"

"It wasn't really a fight," Lucas's dad says, and nudges his wife's hand away. "I'm fine, Sheila. You can stop."

"Dad, who did that to you?" Lucas asks, taking his snuffling sister by the shoulders and pulling her gently away. He can see discoloration around his father's left eye and a cut along the cheekbone. "Are you okay?" he asks, as he rests his chin on the top of his sister's head.

"Yes, son. I'm okay. I stuck around too long in a bad situation, that's all. Have a black eye to show for it."

"But who did it?"

"Your father was picking up some eggs at the grocery," his mom says. "A man behind him started calling him names and said that he'd cut him in line."

"Which I hadn't," his dad asserts. "He must be new to town or passing through because I didn't recognize him. He left as soon as he clocked me. Ditched the six pack he was buying."

Lucas's mom goes to the sink to rinse out the rag she had been using to clean his dad's cheek. "All these years living in Hawkins and this is the first time..." she trails off, shaking her head.

"The first time what...?" Lucas asks.

"The first time one of us has been targeted for the color of our skin," his dad says, standing up from his chair to rest a hand on his wife's shoulder. "But Sheila, this was an isolated incident. And I shouldn't

have let him get to me. I fired back a few insults myself. That's why it escalated."

Lucas watches as his mom turns around to hug her husband. "Just promise me, if there *is* a next time, you'll remove yourself from the situation *before* you get hit."

"I promise."

xxx

"He's okay though, right?" Mike asks as Lucas flops down on his couch. They're in the Wheelers' basement and Lucas has just filled Mike in on what he'd arrived home to.

"Yeah, just has a black eye."

"I bet I know who it was that did it," Mike says.

Lucas sighs. "You can't jump to that conclusion, man."

"You're jumping to it, too!" Mike exclaims. "If you know what *I'm* thinking, then you must be thinking it, too!"

Lucas covers his face with his hands. It's true. Neil Hargrove had been the first to cross his mind. "Okay, so maybe I *am* thinking it. But... if it *was* him, I don't want you to hold it against Max."

Mike groans in frustration. "Here we go..."

Lucas swallows hard. He's been meaning to have this conversation with Mike for a while now. "I just wish you would give her a chance." He lets out a deep breath. "But I get it. She's this new person that I want to be in the party, and you don't know if you can trust her or if she'll fit in. It's... It's how I felt about El. Remember?"

That floors Mike. Lucas can tell because the wind has left him when he croaks out, "Yeah. I remember."

"Looking back on it, I wish I had just trusted your judgment, man. And now I guess... I'm asking you to trust mine. With Max."

Mike nods vaguely. "Okay," he says simply.

Lucas raises his eyebrows. "Really? Okay?"

"Yeah, man. I mean, if you're going to give me a whole *speech* about it, you must *really* like this girl." His voice is dripping with mock exasperation, but sobers when he puts a hand on Lucas's knee. "I trust you."

Lucas smiles shyly. "Thanks."

"Okay, enough of *that*," Mike says and drops the newest issue of *Captain America* in Lucas's lap. "On to more important matters."



## 23. Chapter 23

Dusk is approaching as Steve drives Billy back into town.

They've fallen quiet again and Steve takes a moment to ponder how he wound up here. With Billy Hargrove riding shotgun in his BMW.

He wonders if everything that's happened the past week has just been some kind of dream.

Or nightmare.

Because never in a *million* years would he have thought he'd wind up here.

He feels like he needs to wake up.

"Why didn't you press charges?" Hargrove asks suddenly, making Steve jump and effectively snapping him out of his inner turmoil.

"What?"

"The night I almost killed you. Why didn't you press charges?"

Steve licks his lips and focuses hard on the road before answering. "There was a lot going on that night. Having you arrested was not exactly on my list of priorities."

He doesn't add, *Max asked me not to*.

"I almost killed you," Billy repeats softly, and there's remorse there. Steve can hear it.

He grips the steering wheel tighter. Can't make his voice work to say anything back.

So it just hangs in the air between them.

After a moment, Steve reaches to turn the radio on because he can't handle the silence.

He expects Billy to make a comment about the Don Henley that fills the car, but he doesn't. Steve takes his eyes off the road for a moment to glance at him.

Billy's hands are clasped together and he's biting down - hard - on his lower lip like he's trying to hold in any and all forms of emotion. Anger, fear, sadness... Steve isn't sure. But the pit in his stomach grows larger.

"Are you sure you want me to take you home?" Steve asks him.

"That's what I said, ain't it?" Billy growls back with a challenging tone.

It doesn't faze Steve; he moves onto his next question. "What're you going to do about your car? You know, Tommy's dad does repairs for a living. I could take him your car tonight."

"You'd do that?" Billy croaks, disbelief evident in his voice.

Steve glances at the clock on his dash. It reads 7:22. The shop closes at 8:00. "Yeah."

"Why?"

"I don't know, Hargrove," Steve answers tiredly, because he truly doesn't. "Maybe for the same reason you took me to get *my* car yesterday. The same reason you didn't let me go into my house alone."

When Billy doesn't say anything to that, Steve continues. "Or maybe it's because I just want something to *do*. Because if I'm not keeping busy, then I'm in my head and forced to deal with shit I'm not ready to deal with yet.

"So tell me, Hargrove. Do you want your fucking car fixed or not?"

It's an echo to the line Billy used on him the day before when he'd persuaded Steve to take a ride back to his house, and Billy knows it.

He sniffs and wipes at his eyes. "Yeah. Okay."

When Steve drops him off in front of his driveway, Billy mutters a thanks that Steve wasn't expecting.

His voice is caught in his throat. "Sure. I'll pick you and Max up for school tomorrow. Have Max radio me if..."

He trails off, but Billy nods anyway.

*If something happens.*

Steve watches Hargrove disappear into the house before driving away.

xxx

Steve buys a gas can on his way to the Byers' where he recruits Jonathan to drive him back to Billy's Camaro and then follow him to Hoffman's Auto Repair.

Nancy is there, and she insists on coming too.

She disapproves of the whole ordeal. "You don't owe him anything," she says when they arrive at the shop. "You know that, right?"

"Yes, Nancy. I know that."

"So why are we here?" Jonathan asks as they approach the empty counter of the shop. "He's the idiot who punched the window. He should have to figure this out for himself."

Steve doesn't get a chance to answer him because Tommy materializes - out of nowhere, it seems - and he's walking their way and Steve wants to melt into the floor and disappear. He didn't know Tommy worked for his dad now, but he's wearing the coveralls to prove it.

"Harrington...?"

"Tommy. Hey." Steve stuffs his hands in his pockets, his voice is guarded.

"What's goin' on?" Tommy slings a greasy rag over his shoulder and

looks past them at Billy's Camaro in the parking lot. "Is that Hargrove's car?"

Steve reaches up to scratch the back of his head. "Yeah, busted window needs repair."

Tommy raises his eyebrows and a smirk settles into his features. "He's got you running errands for him? How did *that* happen?"

Nancy steps in front of Steve, hands on her hips. "Steve doesn't need to explain himself to you, Tommy."

"Yeah," Jonathan echoes, and Steve almost smiles at the irony since both of them were trying to get him to explain himself just moments before. "Can you fix the window or not, because we can take business somewhere else, you know."

That's not entirely true - Hoffman's Auto Repair is the only car repair shop within a 30 mile radius. It's why the Hoffman's are doing so well for themselves.

Tommy glances at Steve and rolls his eyes, as if to say, *you ditched me for these clods?* "We can fix the window," he says with sneer. "Let me go grab my dad. He'll give you an estimate."

"On the house!" Steve hears, as Mr. H. enters the lobby from the garage, wearing the same gray coveralls as his son. "Is that Steve Harrington, I see?"

Steve feels his lips quirk into a smile. "Hey, Mr. H," he says sheepishly. Steve had always liked Tommy's dad. "How've you been?"

Mr. H. holds up a hand, deflecting the question. "Cut it with the pleasantries, kid," and runs the same hand through his graying hair. "First, let me give you my condolences about your old man."

"Right," Steve says softly. "Thank you, sir," He nods once and clears his throat of the emotion rising there. He feels Jonathan rest a hand on the small of his back to ground him as Mr. H reels on with the *I couldn't believe its*, and *how are you holding ups*. And Steve answers with the most generic, brush-offs he can muster.

"Well, we've missed you coming around," Mr. H. says sincerely. "Tommy tells me you've been busy - something about wanting to spend all your time with a new girlfriend?" He eyes Nancy and Steve feels his face redden.

It dawns on him then that Tommy hasn't told his father about their falling out. "Yeah, something like that," he says meekly, trusting Nancy and Jonathan will go along with it to avoid an awkward conversation.

Steve hears Tommy scoff a bit from where he's leaning against the counter, but he doesn't say anything, except, "Getting close to closing, Pop."

"Right. Well, Steve, like I said... this one's on the house. Just leave the keys to the Camaro with Tommy, and we'll have her fixed up for you by the end of the day tomorrow."

Tommy holds his hand out expectantly and Steve drops the keys into his palm. "I'll walk you out," he says.

"Thanks, Mr. H.," Steve says again, over his shoulder, as Tommy ushers them out of the shop.

xxx

Once outside, Tommy takes ahold of the meat of Steve's arm. "Can I have a word with you?" He licks his lips as he looks at Jonathan and Nancy. "Alone?"

Steve frowns at the softness in Tommy's voice. "Uh, yeah, I guess." To the others, he says, "Can you guys wait in the car?"

Nancy and Jonathan hesitate. "Steve—"

"It's okay," he assures them. "I'll just be a minute."

They're not happy about it, but they cross the parking lot and disappear into Jonathan's Ford LTD anyway.

"You make a fine third-wheel, Harrington," Tommy remarks, leaning nonchalantly against the siding of the shop. Then, in the same breath,

he says, "That's fucked up about your dad, man."

It's a calculated remark, deliberately devoid of consolation. Steve thinks he should've known better than to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"Yeah, no shit, Tommy."

"Why'd he do it?" Tommy presses, like the jerk he is - looking for something juicy so he can blab it all over town. "Did *you* find him?"

Steve closes his eyes, feeling a swell of sadness in his gut. "You're unbelievable."

"What?" Tommy asks dumbly.

Steve starts backing away. "Just fuck off, Tommy, okay?" he says, before turning on his heel and making a beeline for Byers' car.

"What?" Tommy calls after him. "We were just talking, man!"

Steve flips him the bird over his head and ducks into the backseat of Jonathan's car. He's crying and he hates that he let *Tommy H.* get to him.

"What'd he say to you?" Jonathan asks. "Are you alright?"

Steve wipes his face with his sleeve and sniffs. "Nothing. I'm fine. Just drive, please."

Jonathan doesn't hesitate to oblige.

## 24. Chapter 24

Steve falls asleep on the short drive home.

Nancy fumes silently in the passenger seat. Jonathan can tell by the exasperated little breaths she breathes out every minute or so.

"What, Nancy?" he asks softly, after five minutes of this.

"*Why* is he getting roped in with Hargrove?" she asks. "And why *now*?"

"I don't know, Nance. And I'm not sure that he does either."

"We need to do something about it," she says resolutely.

Jonathan smiles fondly. He loves how determined she is. "What are we gonna do, Nancy? We're not his parents - we're not exactly qualified to tell him what to do."

"But you agree with me," she says. "That Hargrove is bad news."

"That's what his track record shows, yeah," Jonathan allows. "But look, Steve isn't dumb. I know he gives that impression sometimes..." he grins as Nancy backhands him on the arm. He sighs. "I think Steve trusts his instincts. Maybe that's what he's doing now."

"Any *sane* person with *functioning* instincts would run *away* from Hargrove," Nancy grumps, folding her arms across her chest. "Far away."

"You didn't," Jonathan reminds her.

"I stood my ground with him," she says. "That's different than buddy-ing up with him. I confronted him about what he did to Steve and he didn't show even an *ounce* of remorse."

"That doesn't mean he doesn't feel it. You told him yourself that you didn't buy it."

"I know," Nancy sighs. "That's because I want to believe that people

aren't that *cruel*."

"Look, maybe Steve *does* know something that we don't." Jonathan swallows hard as he looks in the rearview mirror at his sleeping passenger. "But whatever happens, I think we just need to have his back right now, okay? Whether that involves Billy Hargrove or not."

"Yeah, okay," Nancy gives in reluctantly. "I guess you're right."

xxx

Nancy kisses Jonathan goodbye at the car before driving off.

Jonathan shakes Steve gently awake.

Joyce has pea soup waiting for them when they step inside.

When Steve almost falls asleep in it, Jonathan guides him to bed. He pulls off his shoes and drapes the comforter over him.

xxx

Joyce and Will are waiting for him in the hallway when he emerges.

Will is speaking into his walkie: "Yes, I'm sure he's *okay*, Dustin. He ate and now he's in bed. Over." Will rolls his eyes and gives the walkie a little shake. "He's relentless," he tells Joyce and Jonathan.

Joyce smiles fondly. "He's just worried about his friend, kiddo."

"I know, I know," Will says, then looks at Jonathan. "I'm gonna start getting ready for bed, too. Are you coming soon?"

Jonathan rubs at his eyes. "Yeah, I'll be in a bit." He gives the kid's shoulder a gentle squeeze.

"I can take tonight's shift if you want," Joyce offers, once Will has disappeared into his bedroom. "You look exhausted."

Pot calling the kettle black.

"It's okay, Mom," Jonathan assures. "His nightmares are getting better. He only wakes up once or twice now."



Joyce nods and reaches up to cup Jonathan's cheek. "I appreciate everything you're doing. I don't think I tell you that enough." Her voice catches on the last word.

Jonathan reaches up to hold onto her wrist, because her eyes are overflowing with tears and Jonathan is desperate to comfort her. He hates seeing his mom cry, and ever since Bob, it's been an everyday occurrence. "It's okay," he shushes as he pulls her into a hug.

"I'm sorry," she mumbles into his shoulder. "I almost made it through, today,"

Jonathan squeezes her a little tighter at those words. "You're allowed to be sad, Mom," he says into her hair, and feels wetness in his own eyes. "I'm sad, too."

They stand there, in the dark hallway, for a little while longer - just rocking back and forth, until Joyce pulls away and composes herself. "You should get to Will," she dismisses.

Jonathan squeezes her hand. "You'll be okay?"

Joyce nods. "Of course." She squeezes his hand, too. "Get some sleep."

She lets go and turns, as Jonathan says, "You too."

xxx

"Stop! Stop it. Please, stop!"

Jonathan wakes to screaming. Reflexively, he turns on the nightstand lamp and begins his mantra of, "It's okay, Will, I'm right here. You're safe. You're alright."

"Jonathan, it's not me," Will tells him, nudging him to get out of the bed. "It's Steve." The screams from the room beside them had woken him, too.

"HELP!"

"*Shit*," Jonathan breathes as the realization hits. He scrambles out of Will's bed and sprints to his bedroom, where Steve is sitting up,

tangled up in the sheets, his hands held out defensively.

He keeps yelling *stop* and *get back* and *don't*. Then Jonathan hears it: *Hargrove*. Steve is begging Billy to get away from him, to *stop*.

Jonathan stomach is ice as he flips on the overhead light and runs to grab Steve around his torso, holding him close as he bucks beneath him, still caught in the nightmare. His screams start to fade as he wakes.

"It's okay," Jonathan tells him, gently in his ear, repeating his mantra from earlier. "You're safe. You're alright, Steve."

xxx

When Steve has considerably collected himself, they move to the front porch so he can have a smoke to further calm his nerves. He's visibly shaken.

Jonathan takes it upon himself to stay with him. He tells Joyce and Will to go back to bed.

He's careful not to pry. He waits for Steve to speak first.

It takes a few moments, a few drags on the cigarette, before he starts talking.

"Sorry for getting you up, Byers," he says softly.

"It's no trouble," Jonathan assures, and means it.

Steve is frowning hard at his shoe as the cigarette hangs loosely between his fingers. "You probably want to know what that was about, right?"

Jonathan bites down on his lip and picks at a fray on his jeans. "I think I already know. You, uh, you said his name."

Steve breathes deeply. "Oh."

"You want to talk about it?"

Steve shrugs. "I dream about it a lot. The fight."

Jonathan nods vaguely. "It's post-traumatic stress," he says. "That's what Will's doctor calls it. He's says it's pretty common after going through something emotionally or physically damaging."

"It's not like I was possessed by a shadow monster," Steve says, scoffing a little bit at the idea of it all.

"No," Jonathan allows. "But what you went through with Billy wasn't nothing. He could've killed you, Steve."

"Yeah. I know."

"So why did you help him tonight?"

Steve blows out a ring of smoke. "That's a bit of a loaded question, Byers," he says.

Jonathan smiles slightly. "I thought it might be."

"Well, the short answer is: I have no fucking idea."

"Okay, and what's the long answer?"

"The long answer, I think, is that I'm starting to realize that me and Hargrove are a lot alike. Or, at least, we're more alike than different."

Jonathan doesn't see it. "He's a jerk, Steve. You're nothing like him."

"Maybe not anymore," Steve says. "But I used to be a jerk, too. You know that better than anybody." He puts his cigarette out on the step in front of him. "I think I helped him today because he didn't have anybody else. And because Max worries about him. She cares more about him than I thought."

Jonathan senses that Steve wants to elaborate on that, but he doesn't. Like he might have a secret that isn't his to tell.

"These past couple of days, when I've been with him, I've felt... I don't know. I've felt better about all the shit going on in my life. Like maybe he's a distraction, or... fuck. I really just don't know, Byers. I

can't explain it."

"That's okay. I get it," Jonathan says. "Just..."

"Be careful?" Steve guesses.

"*Really* careful," Jonathan emphasizes.

"I will be."

## 25. Chapter 25

Steve honks the horn to his BMW as he sits in front of Hargrove's house, alerting Max and Billy of his presence.

As promised, he's picking them up for school.

Dustin sits beside him in the passenger seat because he'd radioed Steve that morning and had demanded that they go get pancakes at the diner.

Dustin's treat in exchange for a ride to school.

Steve had jumped at the chance; anything to get him out of the Byers' house for a bit - he was awfully embarrassed about his spectacle last night, waking them all up with his nightmare.

Steve hadn't been able to fall asleep after his discussion with Jonathan. He'd tried, but his mind kept wandering to troubled teens, and Demodogs, and Shadow Monsters, and dead dads, and hurt moms.

When the sun began to rise, Steve had given up completely and had gone to take a shower. And to kill even more time, he did his hair.

"The hair is back!" Dustin had exclaimed happily when he hopped into Steve's car, and all the turmoil of the night melted away.

Steve loves that kid so much it hurts sometimes.

xxx

"Here they come," Dustin says, nodding at the Hargroves' front porch.

In Hawkins, it's a tradition for the high school basketball team to dress up in a collared shirt and tie on the day of a game. So Steve isn't completely surprised when Billy emerges from the porch door in that very get-up, with Max right behind him.

"Oh yeah," Dustin breathes. "It's the Jefferson game tonight."

Steve had forgotten all about that; he had forgotten all about basketball, really. But the Jefferson game was a big deal - they were their biggest rivals.

"Hey Steve, hey Dustin," Max chirps as she opens the back door to Steve's car and slips across; Billy drops into the seat beside her.

"Hey guys," Steve returns. "What's shakin'?"

Max snorts and Dustin gives him a look of utter bewilderment. "What's *shakin'*? You are such a *dad*, Steve."

Steve smiles. "Yeah, yeah. How'd it go last night?" he asks as he pulls away from the house, curious to know if their parents had bought Max's cover.

He's directing his question at Billy - eyes him in the rearview mirror - because Billy is wearing his sunglasses and has the collar to his shirt popped, effectively shielding the majority of his face, and Steve can't get a read on him.

"Nothing happened, Harrington," he answers tiredly. "It was fine."

"I wouldn't say *fine*—" Max starts.

"Maxine," Billy warns with a snarl. "*Can. It.*"

A hush falls over the car then.

Steve recognizes the tone in Billy's voice. It's guarded in the same way Steve's is when people ask him about his parents never being home or why they never show at his basketball games. He hates those questions.

So he makes a conscious effort to stop prying.

He clears his throat to break the silence. "So, uh, are you still going to the game tonight?" he asks.

"Yeah..." Billy says slowly, like Steve just asked the dumbest question in the world. "Pretty sure I have to show up to play."

"Wait. You're gonna *play*?" Steve hadn't even considered that prospect. "But your hand—"

"My hand is fine."

"Um, okay, bullshit." He's tempted to pull off to the side of the road and examine the appendage in question for himself.

"Let it go, Harrington," Billy says dully, resigned even. "I'm playing."

Steve makes eye contact with Max through the rearview mirror, and she just shrugs.

Steve decides to let it drop.

It's quiet again for a few beats until Dustin says, "Are you gonna go, Steve?"

"What?"

"To the game. Lucas says he wants to go, so I think we're all going to be there. You should sit with us, Max," he adds.

She beams. "Yeah, definitely!"

Considering Steve had forgotten about the game until five minutes ago, he isn't sure how to answer Dustin's question. "Um. I don't know if I'll go. I guess I should..."

He *is* part of the team, after all.

"Yeah, I guess I'll be there," he decides as he pulls his BMW into the school parking lot. "Hargrove, Mr. H said your car'll be finished by then, so I'll have Byers drive it over here before the game."

Steve hears Billy take in a sharp breath but he doesn't acknowledge what was said.

"Hey, did you hear me?"

"Yeah, Harrington, I heard you," Billy growls, voice threatening as he kicks open the passenger door. "Stop doing me favors, alright? I don't

fucking want them or need them. Just... just stay the fuck away from me altogether."

"Billy!" Max admonishes, but Billy is already out of the car, slamming the door shut and stalking into the high school.

Steve sits stunned in the driver's seat, put-off by Billy's unwarranted outburst. Stunned at how personal it feels.

"Yup. It's official. He's biggest asshole on the planet," Dustin says. "I *told* you."

"I'm so sorry, Steve," Max breathes. "That was... I don't know what came over him."

"It's fine," Steve dismisses. "Just... tell me what happened last night."

Screw not prying.

Max seems to hesitate briefly, but caves.

"His dad knows about the car," she tells them with a sigh. "I guess Neil was at the pub after work and saw Billy's Camaro in the parking lot, busted window and all. So it didn't matter what cover story we came up with. He knew we were lying."

"What'd he do?" Dustin asks.

"That's the weird part. He didn't do *anything*. He looked *pissed* but he just told Billy to get some sleep. Told him, 'you have a big game tomorrow.'"

Steve's stomach somersaults. "That's why he's so adamant about playing."

"Yeah."

"So Neil left him off the hook so he could play. What does that mean for tonight, then? After the game?"

"I don't know," Max breathes, and her watery eyes don't go unnoticed by Steve. But she quickly sobers. "Look, I shouldn't have told you all



that. Billy told me not to. You can't say anything, okay?"

"Max—"

"We're going to be late," she cuts him off. "C'mon, Dustin." She kicks open her door and slides out. "Thanks for the ride, Steve!"

"Yeah, thanks, Steve," Dustin echoes. "Hey, if you come to the game, come find us at intermission."

Steve barks a laugh. "Intermission? Do you mean *halftime*?"

"Yeah, whatever it's called!" Dustin exclaims, exasperated.

"I think I'm gonna have to stay with the team, bud."

Dustin's face falls. "Oh. Right. Well, look for me in the stands. I'll wave!"

Steve can't help the smile. "Sure, kid."

"Dustin, come *on*," Max nags, beckoning him from a few paces in front of Steve's car.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Dustin grouses. "Later, Steve."

"Later, shithead."

xxx

*Oh fuck.*

Steve hadn't prepared for *this*.

This moment of silence for his father before the game starts.

He's never felt so many eyes on him at once as he stands - sways, buckles, tries not to fall over - in the middle of the court.

It feels like it lasts a lifetime.

Steve's never been so thankful to hear the beginning of the *Star Spangled Banner*.

He'd been holding his breath and lets it out in a shuddering exhale while the pep band plays the national anthem.

Coach McGregor squeezes the nape of Steve's neck comfortingly and doesn't let go for the duration of the song.

"It means a lot to the team that you're here," Coach tells him through the applause at the end, and nudges him forward as the rest of the team gathers around. "Harrington leads the cheer!"

So Steve counts them down, the team roars "Tigers!" and the game begins.

xxx

Billy plays out of his mind.

Steve truly can't comprehend it.

He hits more three-pointers than Steve can even keep track of. Forces turnovers like he's playing against a bunch of ten-year-olds. Wrecked hand and all.

Steve overhears Coach McGregor and Coach Cantor discussing Hargrove in disbelief. *He doesn't show up for practice for three days, and somehow he's playing lights out. I can't believe we thought about benching him.*

At halftime, Steve sits on the bench in front of his locker while the coaches talk strategy for the next half. Hargrove sits beside him in front of *his* locker. They were assigned alphabetically by last name.

Steve watches him, because that's what he's been doing all night and can't seem to break the habit. Billy's cradling his left wrist and staring intently at a drain on the floor in front of his foot. The knuckles on his left hand are colored a deep purple. His right leg is bouncing up and down as he listens to the coaches. His jaw is set.

He says, "Yes, sir," when Coach Cantor tells him to keep up the good work in the second half.

xxx

Back on the courtside bench before the start of the third quarter, Steve scans the crowd for Dustin and company. His eyes land on Max first - he can't miss that fiery hair. She's standing on the landing speaking to who appears to be her mother, a woman with matching red hair. She's still wearing her coat. A man - Billy's father, Steve presumes - stands beside her, still wearing his windbreaker. They must've just arrived.

Max waves goodbye to her mother and then descends the stairs to sit with guys. Dustin is waving furiously in Steve's direction, and Steve appeases him with a wave back.

Steve looks back up at Mr. Hargrove, who is now leaning on the railing over the stands, his eyes trained on his son as he finishes warming up in the allotted time before the second half begins. Even from a distance, Steve feels intimidated by the man.

Billy hasn't looked up at the stands once since the start of the game.

Steve hopes it stays that way.

xxx

At the close of the game, Hargrove is surrounded by his team, and fans, and parents, all congratulating him on the win.

They hadn't beaten Jefferson in fourteen years, and thanks to Billy, they ran away with this one: 68-52.

Mr. Hargrove hasn't left his spot at the railing, his eyes haven't left his son.

Billy sees him now. He keeps glancing up at him as he shakes the hands of parents, wearing a forced smile on his face.

Steve notices how he's slowly backing up towards the exit of the gym, leading to outside. Notices how his face is pale and slick with sweat.

Billy slips out the door the first second he gets a chance, and Steve follows.

He could use some air, too.

xxx

Steve finds him a couple paces to the left of the door. "You alright, man?" he asks.

Billy's right arm is bracing the brick wall and he's leaning his forehead against the meat of his wrist. He doesn't say anything back.

Steve swallows hard. "That was a helluva game you played."

Still, no response.

It's dark, but Steve can see that Hargrove's body is trembling. Quaking even.

Steve takes a step closer, worried now. "Billy—"

"No, stop," Billy warns, low and choked. "G'na be sick." His left arm is outstretched — an attempt to keep Steve from coming any closer.

Steve comes to a halt abruptly, recognizing that it's not a prediction, but present reality. In the same breath, Billy bows his head and retches. Saliva floods out of his mouth followed by a swill of stomach contents, meeting the asphalt with an echoing slosh.

Steve watches helplessly as Billy takes in gulps of air, trying to abate the nausea. It's to no avail, and he spends a couple more minutes heaving up bile and a whole lot of nothing before Steve dares to speak. "Hey, you're okay," he says softly, but it sounds lame and unnecessary to his ears.

Billy doesn't acknowledge him in the slightest, but his body *does* end its upheaval. He pushes away from the wall and backs up so there is a good distance between him, where he got ill, and Steve.

He turns his back to Steve and folds at his waist to hold onto his knees. His breaths are still coming in gulps, and when he exhales, it's shaky. He continues to spit strings of saliva to the ground.

Steve stands rooted to the spot, surprised at how much he's itching to provide Billy some kind of comfort, he just doesn't know how. "Hargrove," he says tentatively. "Are you alright? Can I get you some

water or something?"

Billy straightens up then and runs his hands through his hair. He shivering now, because he's covered in sweat and it's a chilly November evening, but seems to relish in the cool air. He rolls his shoulders backwards, cracks his neck, and turns on his heel.

He checks Steve in the shoulder on his way back inside.

"I told you to stay away from me."

xxx

Steve remains standing outside for a moment, feeling numb, the dismissal stinging just as much as it had that morning.

But he pushes it down and follows Billy inside.

The gym has cleared out considerably. Mr. Hargrove has left his post on the landing. Billy is collecting his water bottle from the bench.

He tucks it under his arm before heading for the locker room.

Steve calls out to him. "Hargrove, wait."

Billy pauses by the locker room door, and turns back to face him.

"Your keys," Steve says as he approaches, and tosses him the keys to his Camaro. He'd slipped another key on the ring, too.

If Billy needs somewhere safe to go tonight, Steve wants him to have it.

Billy snatches the keys out of the air and looks down. He recognizes the foreign key almost immediately. "What the *hell*, Harrington?" he growls, meeting Steve's eyes. "Your house key?"

Steve senses he's going to protest, but doesn't give him the opportunity. "Just take it," Steve says, leaving no room for argument, arms folded across his chest. "Swallow your *fucking* pride, and take it."

Hargrove turns his head away, biting down hard on his lower lip. He clears his throat, nods once, then pockets the keys in his breakaway pants.

He disappears into the locker room without another word.

## 26. Chapter 26

"Hop? What are you doing here? Is everything alright?"

That's the greeting Jim receives as he stands on Joyce's front porch.

"Everything is fine, Joyce," he assures her, then further explains: "I'm on patrol tonight, but have a few minutes before I need to be at the station. Thought I'd stop by, see how everybody's doing. Where are the kids?" He peers around her.

"They were at the basketball game down at the high school. They should be home any minute now. Jonathan usually takes Will for a milkshake after games."

Jim grimaces. "So I'm interrupting the first alone-time you've had in weeks."

"More like saving me from it," Joyce says. "Come in." She beckons him inside by grasping his arm and pulling him across the threshold.

xxx

She puts a pot of coffee on, and they settle into the kitchen chairs, facing each other.

"How're you holding up?" Jim asks, then winces because he'd detested that question. After Sarah.

Joyce smiles sadly at him. Humors him. "You know."

Jim clears his throat. "You can talk about him, if you'd like. I'll listen."

It's awkward. This kind of conversation is always awkward. And it's a conversation they should have had sooner. But Bob's death took a little bit of a back burner to everything else. Will. El. Now Steve.

Joyce shakes her head, swallows hard. "The man that Bob was... his life... the way he died... it kind of speaks for itself, doesn't it?" she says thoughtfully, though her voice is pinched.

Jim nods. "He was a good man."

Jim hadn't wanted to admit it when he was alive - out of jealousy more than anything else - but there was no denying it now. Bob Newby was a saint.

"The best," Joyce whispers. She reaches across to squeeze Jim's hand, is quick to change topics. "How's El?"

"She's good. She's real good," Jim tells her. "She's back."

Joyce smiles, shakes her head in bewilderment. "She's amazing."

"I hate that I have to keep her hidden away," Jim sighs.

"You're keeping her *safe*, Hop."

"I know, but—" He breaks off, an idea occurring to him then. "Hey, are you working this weekend?"

"No," Joyce answers. "Why?"

"What if we took the kids and went away for a few days? Get the hell out of Hawkins?"

Joyce raises her eyebrows, intrigued. "Where would we go?"

"My uncle has a cabin in Ohio. Hocking Hills area."

Joyce ponders it. "That could be really good, I think. For Will. For El. For Steve."

"For you," Jim adds knowingly.

"I'll talk it over with the kids," Joyce promises as she stands to pour the coffee.

xxx

As Jim starts his engine to his K4 Blazer, the kids pull into the drive beside him.

He gives them a honk and a wave, rolls down his window.



"How was the game?" he asks as he emerges from Steve's BMW.

"We won!" Will says happily.

"No kiddin'?" Jim asks. "You played Jefferson, didn't you?"

"Yeah, first time we've won in—"

Steve is cut off by Jim's police radio. "Chief, are you on your way to the station?"

Jim grabs for his mike, answers, "About to head there now."

"Well, don't. You're needed at 4427 Emery Road. There's been a domestic altercation between father and son. Wife made the call. Ambulance was requested."

"Copy. En route." Jim puts the car in reverse. "Guess that's my cue," he tells the kids.

"Wait, Emery Road?" Steve repeats, grabbing onto the window frame before Jim can lift his foot off the brake. "That's Hargrove's street. Chief, let me come with you."

"What?" Jim frowns. "Harrington, I can't just take you on official police business."

"No, I have to come!" Steve practically shouts, panicked, tears pricking his eyes. "It's my fault! I shouldn't have let him leave with him. Billy was *scared*. I should've *done* something!"

"Steve—" Jonathan says gently, trying to talk him down, grabs ahold of his elbow. "Let Hopper handle it."

"It's okay, kid," Jim tells him. "He can come." Steve apparently has some insight into the situation that could be useful. "Hurry up, Harrington."

Steve releases his grip on the window, nods obediently, and rounds the car.

"Are you sure?" Jonathan asks Jim.

"I'm sure. You and Will get inside, fill your mom in."

Jonathan nods as Steve closes the door to the passenger seat. "Yessir."

xxx

Steve is tapping his fingers nervously on his knee during the drive.

"Kid, relax, and tell me what you know."

"I can't relax," Steve says. "Billy's dad beats him."

"He told you that?" Hopper asks.

Jim, of course, had suspected the very same thing every time he'd found Billy sleeping in his Camaro or when he'd him picked up for being drunk and disorderly. But Billy had never budged. Hadn't let Hopper help him. Always pegged the bruises on some schoolyard fight.

"He didn't have to tell me," Steve says solemnly. He bangs his head against the headrest and closes his eyes. "I knew he was in trouble tonight and I didn't do anything and now he's hurt."

Jim reaches out a hand to still Steve's shaking knee. "If Billy is hurt, that's his dad's fault, not yours. You understand me?"

He glances over as Steve breathes out shakily and nods.

"Almost there."

xxx

Susan and Max are sitting on the steps leading up to their house, arms wrapped around each other, when Jim and Steve arrive. The ambulance had beaten them there; a paramedic closes the doors and rounds to the front before driving off, siren blaring.

Jim and Steve kick open their doors.

"Steve!" Max immediately breaks away from her mother to give Steve a hug. "What are you doing here?"

Steve returns her hug, then drops to one knee so he can get a good look at her. From the dim illumination of the streetlight, Jim notices that she has a colored cheek and tear tracks on her face.

"Hopper was at the Byers' when the dispatcher called - I overheard. He let me ride along," Steve tells her as he cups her cheek. "Are you alright? Is Billy? Where's Neil?"

"I'm fine. Neil is the one on the ambulance," Max says. "We don't know where Billy is. He ran. After... he just ran."

Jim lets Max finish filling Steve in while he introduces himself to Susan. "Jim Hopper, Chief of Police," he greets, extending a hand.

Susan reaches out a trembling hand to shake his. "Thank you for coming, Chief."

"Can you fill me in on what happened here tonight?" Jim asks.

Susan nods, cuts to the chase. "My husband initiated a physical altercation with my step-son following a heated argument. He threw him on the floor and stomped on his hand that was already injured." Susan dabs at her eyes. "My daughter, Max, tried to get my husband to stop and he... he turned on her. Slapped her. Grabbed her. Billy acted to protect Max. He used a frying pan to knock my husband unconscious to keep him from hurting her any more."

A pit forms in Jim's stomach; he feels sick at the description.

"Where is Billy now?" Jim asks over the lump in his throat.

"We don't know. I don't think he knew how I was going to react to what he'd done. He was scared and ran."

Jim eyes the Camaro in the driveway. "He left his car."

"I'm going to go looking for him," Steve says entering the conversation as he steps closer to Susan and Jim. "I think I know where he is."

"Where's that?" Jim inquires.

"I gave him a key to my parents' house at the game tonight. I think he might've gone there. It's not too far. Less than a mile."

Jim nods, licks his lips. "Okay, Harrington. I'm going to let you do that while I get some more details from these ladies and investigate the scene. You call as soon as you get to the house - let us know if you found him. Figure out if he needs medical attention. We'll be here in case he comes back."

"Got it," Steve says as he backs away, already starting to jog in the direction of his neighborhood.

They watch him disappear out of sight. "Let's head in out of the cold," Jim says with a sigh, and ushers the shaken girls back into the house.

## 27. Chapter 27

It feels a little surreal, knocking on the door to his own house, as he tries to slow the thumping of his heart while his breaths come in heaves.

"Billy?" he says through the oak. "It's Steve, man. Open the door."

There's a moment where Steve panics. What if Billy hadn't come here? What if he is still out in the cold, running, scared, *hurt*?

He knocks again. "Billy. Are you there?"

*Come on, come on, come on.*

The door swings open then and that should bring relief, but instead Steve feels a whole new level of panic.

Because Billy is standing in front of him but he's *vacant*. Docile.

There are tears sliding down his cheeks, soaking wet curls joining the mix. His left arm is hanging limply by his side, his hand bent in ways it never should. His knees are shaking, like standing upright is more of a chore than his body can handle.

"Steve?" he breathes out, leaning heavily against the doorjamb. He blinks dazedly.

"Yeah, it's me." Steve reaches for him out of instinct. "Sit down on the steps, okay? Let me look at you."

Billy is like putty as Steve guides him to the stairs, lets his head fall onto Steve's shoulder. He doesn't understand. "How d-did you...?"

"The chief was at the Byers' when we got back from the game," Steve explains to him as he lowers Billy to the second step up so they can sit side-by-side. Billy keeps his cheek against Steve's shoulder. "The station radioed him; I overheard and he let me ride along. I just came from your place. Max is okay. Neil was taken in an ambulance."

Billy takes a moment to process all that. "What about Susan?" he

croaks.

"She's worried about you."

Billy makes a disbelieving noise in the back of his throat. "Max is okay?" he repeats, lifting his head up, like those words had just clicked.

"She's worried about you, too. But yeah."

Billy lets out a shaky breath. "He was h-hurting her..."

"And you stopped him, man. She's okay," Steve puts a grounding hand on his knee. "Now I need to make sure *you* are." He glances at Billy's contorted hand. "You need a hospital."

Billy blinks and looks down. He doesn't even try to save face or put on a front, and that rattles Steve to his very core. "Yeah," he croaks. Agrees.

"Did you hit your head?"

"Dn't know."

Steve cranes his neck to try and see if Billy's pupils are blown, but it's hard to tell in the dim light.

"I'm gonna drive you, okay? I just need to call Hopper and let him know I found you."

"Kay."

Steve leaves him on the steps and goes to hunt down the cordless phone in the kitchen.

The kitchen, where his dad had taken his last breath. Steve hadn't dared to step foot in there when he came with Hargrove to get his BMW, and he isn't crazy about doing it now.

He stands at the entryway for a moment. Hopper must've cleaned the place, because it's spotless now. All the pizza boxes, soda cans, and beer bottles have disappeared.

*Jesus, just look at this place, Steven!*

Steve holds his breath like the room has contaminated air, dashes to the phone, grabs the keys to his dad's Audi off the hook nearby, and dashes back, not willing to stay in that room a second longer than he needs to.

When he returns, Billy is sagged against the wall, eyes fighting to stay open.

Steve cups his cheek, uses his thumb to wipe away the stray tears that linger, and gives Billy's right shoulder a gentle shake.

"Hey, you still with me?"

Billy grunts and nods vaguely.

"I need you to tell me your number."

Billy mumbles the digits and lets his eyes slip closed while Steve makes the call.

xxx

Hopper picks up on the first ring.

*"Kid?"*

"He's here, Chief."

Hopper breathes out a sigh of relief, and his voice is muffled when he passes the news along to Susan and Max. *"How's he looking? He okay?"*

"His hand's messed up. Think he might be in a bit of shock. I'm going to drive him to the hospital. I'll..." Steve swallows. "I'll take my dad's car."

Hopper is quiet for a beat. *"Are you sure?"*

And Steve understands why he's asking. Because being in that car is going to be hard, and he knows it.

He just doesn't really see another option.

"I'm sure," he answers and tries to believe it.

"*We're almost finished up here,*" Hopper tells him. "*We'll meet you at the hospital.*"

"Okay. See you there."

xxx

"Steve?"

Billy's voice is careful and quiet when he speaks Steve's name from the passenger seat of the Audi. His head is resting against the window. They've been driving in silence that Steve has desperately wanted to break, but hadn't known how.

"Yeah?" Steve takes his eyes off the road to quickly glance in Billy's direction. Holds back the reflex to ask him if he's okay, because... dumb question.

So he almost drives off the road when Billy asks *him*: "You alright?"

The fucking irony.

Not to mention utterly unexpected out of the mouth of Billy Hargrove. The question, the genuine concern... it throws Steve completely off-guard.

"I'm..." Steve doesn't know what to say. His gut reaction, of course, is to say *I'm fine*, but he knows that's the easy way out. And the question means more coming from Billy than anyone else who has asked him that the past couple of days. The timing just feels... off.

Considering they're en route to the hospital. For Billy.

Even through the fog of pain and terror that Billy must be experiencing, he seems to realize how out of place the question is. So he adds. "Your arms are shaking."

Oh.

He's not wrong. Steve's arms are practically *vibrating* as he grips the



steering wheel.

"It's just... this is a lot," Steve explains. It's the truth.

"I know," Billy says, his head still resting on the cool glass of the window, like he doesn't have the strength to lift it. "It's why I told you to stay the fuck away from me." He sounds so sad and defeated and Steve can't stand it.

He doesn't know how to make Billy *understand*.

"This is a lot," Steve repeats softly. "But it's not more than I can handle," he says that firmly, confidently. "I'm here and I want to be here."

But Billy still isn't hearing him. "Why?" he croaks, then sniffs. "You have so much else going on. And I... I fucking..."

*Beat your face in. Shattered a plate over your head. Terrorized your friends.*

"You were scared."

And that's just it, isn't it? Steve realizes as he says it. The core to Billy Hargrove is fear. The shell, his *mask*, is anger. And right now, that shell is stripped away and Steve can plainly see everything underneath.

"I'm sorry," Billy says.

Steve swallows over the lump in his throat.

"I know."